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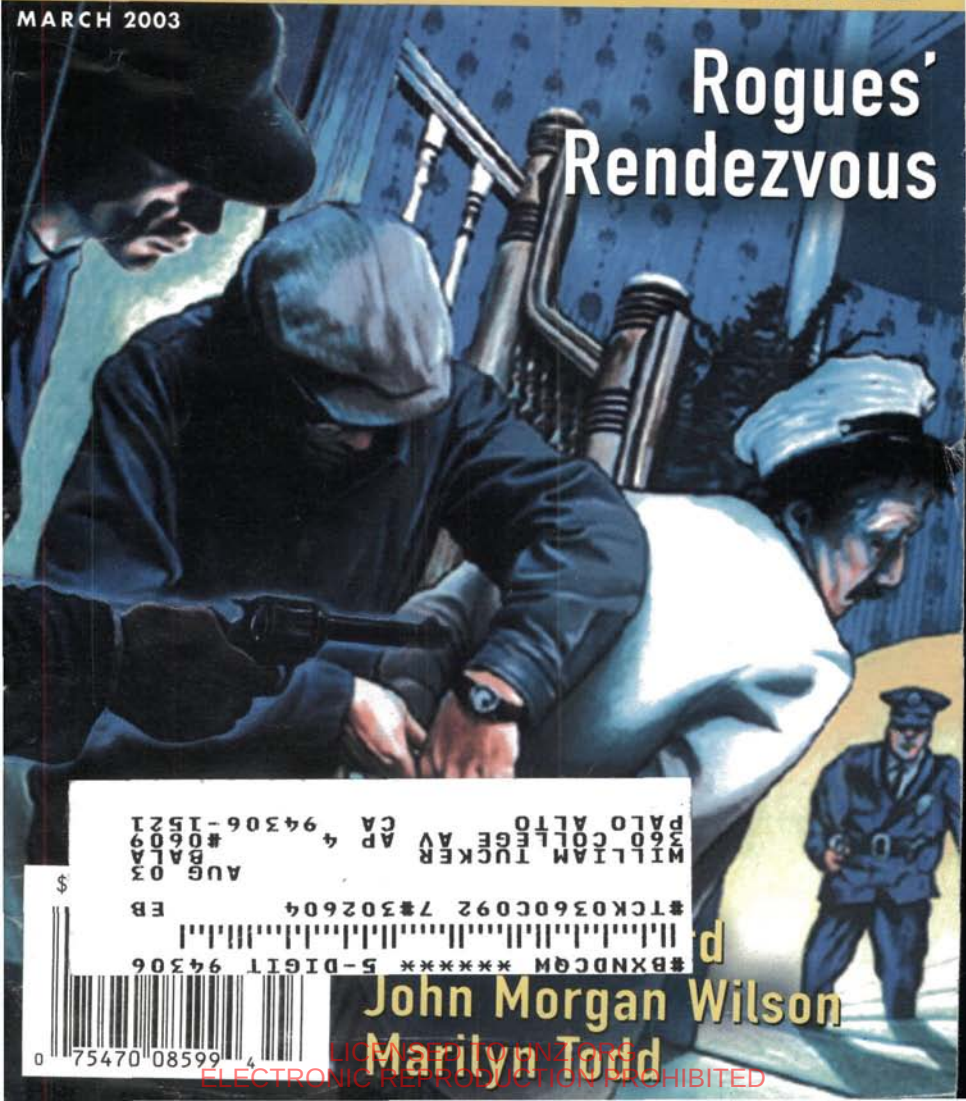

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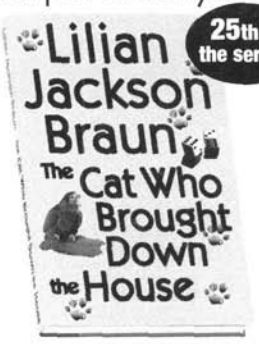

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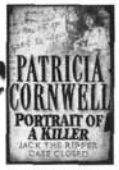

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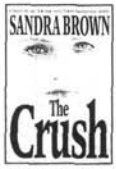

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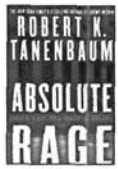

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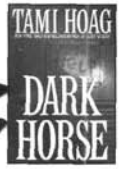

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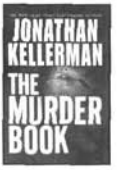

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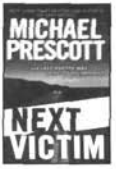

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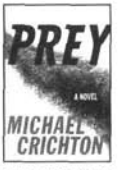

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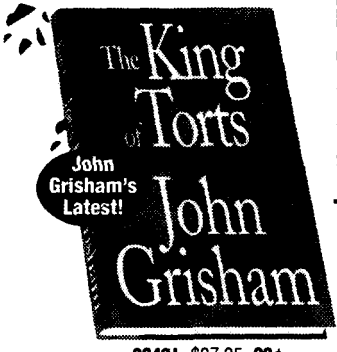

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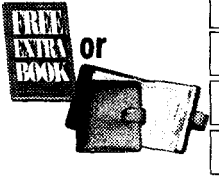

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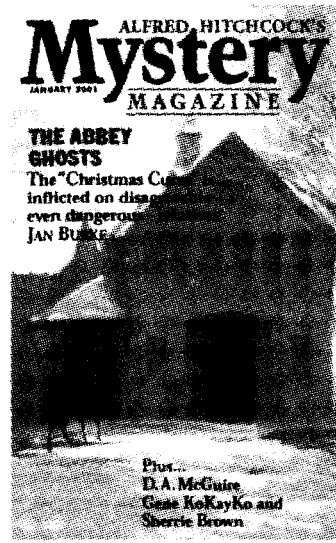

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The Wings of Isis

by Marilyn Todd

"So then."

With two clicks of the imperial fingers, the handmaidens fell back in a wave, but it took an imperial glare before Kames, head of the queen's bodyguard, retreated his men out of earshot as well. Cleopatra had to lift her head to look into the eyes of her captain of archers.

"What are they saying about me this time, Benet? That the queen speaks nine languages fluently and can't say no in any one of them?"

Spies, deep undercover, kept her abreast of the scheming and plotting among her so-called trusted council. Feedback from the common people was no less important.

Benet swallowed his smile. "Nothing of the sort, Your Royal Highness. Your people are behind you all the way in—" He paused, ostensibly to adjust his sword belt. "—in Egypt's alliance with Rome."

"Your tact will make you a general someday."

And a good general at that, Cleopatra decided. Benet was a born

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tactician, intelligent, brave, and not too dishonest. Above all, he was that rarest of breeds, he was loyal.

The eagle of Rome was casting a shadow across virtually the whole of the civilised world. Iberia to Asia Minor, Libya to the Black Sea. Now that Julius Caesar had his sights set on the great prize of Egypt, the pickings were rich for, say, an ambitious young captain of archers for whom the matter of allegiance rated low on his list of priorities.

So far, Benet had shown no desire to serve himself above his country. But it would be foolish to take such loyalty for granted. . . .

Boom, boom, boom-a-doom-a-dum-dum. The pounding of the drums, soft and insistent, cut short the briefing.

"We'll talk later," she told him.

Information could wait.

Mighty Isis could not.

"Here's something you won't have seen before," writes Marilyn Todd, "Cleopatra solving a murder! Well, you know me. Give me a scheming little minx and I'll write a story round her." The little minx who stars in Ms. Todd's best-known mystery series, Claudia Seferius, also has a new case. Look for the eighth novel, *Dark Horse* (Severn House '02). Ancient Rome is a favored setting for Ms. Todd, who also writes contemporaries. ¶

Boom, boom, boom-a-doom-a-dum-dum.

The memory of those lazy drumbeats would stay with Cleopatra for the rest of her life. They encapsulated the point when she walked into the temple a queen—*and walked out a goddess.*

From this moment on, Cleopatra was to be worshipped as Isis incarnate. It was official. She was now the Great Mother, protectress of the Pharaoh, goddess of healing, fertility, and magic. Ah yes. Never underestimate the power of magic, she thought. Rising from the throne of solid gold as the ceremony drew to its close, Cleopatra felt the brush of the goddess's wings on her face. And the wings were beating in triumph.

As she made her way across the cool marble floor of the temple, she passed Yntef, the shaven-headed high priest, sweating under his leopard skin, his eyes still unfocussed from his recent trance. Renenutet, the priestess of Bast dressed as the cat-headed goddess, made obeisance. As did Tamar, Hathor's priestess, wearing the ceremonial mask of the cow. Temple musicians lined the aisle, their harps and reed flutes playing the queen out. The choir sang softly—young women, whose voices had been trained from early childhood to sing as sweetly as the larks which soared above the

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broad wheat fields of the Nile and lifted the spirits of those who laboured to bring home the harvest.

Glancing back over her shoulder, Cleopatra committed the moment to memory. The temple regalia, the black bowl of divination, the fat sacred cats, the dark ceiling studded with bright silver stars. Flaming torches high on the walls brought brightly painted frescoes to life, made them dance. Acrobats on the north wall, fishermen hauling home their nets on the south, Anubis weighing the heart of Osiris against the ostrich feather of truth on the east. Best of all was the fresh painting on the west wall: Cleopatra as Pharaoh. Let the council take the bones out of that!

Boom, boom, boom-a-doom-a-dum-dum.

As the mighty cedarwood doors of the temple swung inwards, the queen suddenly faltered. Priests and priestesses, acolytes, the crowd outside—all would naturally assume she had been blinded by shafts of brilliant white sunshine. They could not possibly know that, for an instant, Cleopatra had forgotten where she was. That, when she stepped into the light, she had been shocked by the alien world into which she had been propelled.

A world which babbled not only too fast, but in Latin.

A world where, in place of the calm green waters of the life-giving Nile, the Tiber ran, brown and rancid, its lush banks long since vanished under warehouses and wharves. Despite the heat of the sunshine, she shivered. This was a world inhabited by fair-skinned people whose women were chattel, handed over from father to husband without rights, and whose men swaddled themselves in thick woollen togas, even in this merciless heat. There were other differences, too. These barbarians burned their dead. Bent their knee to feeble human gods in devotions which were no better than common horse-trading.

Yet these people ruled the world. . . .

It had been easy, while Yntef conducted his ritual divination, the cloudy water swirling in the bowl beneath a film of warm and scented oil, to forget she was no longer in her beloved Alexandria, gazing out from her palace across the Great Sea, feeling its cool breeze brush her lips. Instead Cleopatra was in Rome. A city that, to many, represented the very heart of the enemy. . . .

All eyes were upon the Egyptian queen as she descended the temple steps. Precious stones had been woven into her heavy plaited wig. Amethysts, emeralds, sapphires, and pearls, every facet reflecting back sunlight. Bangles and bracelets encircled ankles and arms. Each finger was adorned by a ring, as was each toe, and round her neck hung a shining pectoral of gold. There were times, and this was one of them, when Cleopatra could barely hold herself upright with the weight of the metal but, far from home, her people needed the reassurance of the pomp and

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the ceremony.

In short, they needed someone to look up to.

Someone to believe in, in these turbulent times.

At the foot of the steps, she held up a hand to stall her bodyguard and beckoned over her captain of archers. "You were about to tell me, Benet, what the people of Alexandria really feel about Cleopatra's liaison with the Roman dictator. Do they fear I am selling them out?"

Benet had still not grown accustomed to his queen's forthright manner. It sat strangely at odds with the long-winded words of her political advisers, and he often wondered how she juggled court etiquette with her compulsion to drive straight to the core.

"Far from it," he replied quietly.

Across the flagged courtyard, shaded with acacias and sacred sycamore trees, Kames scowled his resentment at a mere captain's confidence with the young queen.

"When Julius Caesar stormed the palace in Alexandria three years ago," Benet said, "Your Majesty's people saw hope die in the dust of his four thousand troops."

"Go on," Cleopatra urged.

She was not blind to Kames's scowls. Benet indeed walked a tightrope, but not in the way Kames imagined. Noble from birth, as with everyone else in authority—Kames included—the captain of archers was blessed with the common touch. An ability to tap into the Alexandrians' innermost feelings, secure their trust, assure them their confidences would not be betrayed. Perhaps, she reflected idly, this was because precious little of her own highly interbred Macedonian blood ran through Benet's veins. Benet was a true-born Egyptian.

"By the time Rome trampled the city," he said, "our own regency had betrayed its people twice over. First, with the coup which exiled Your Majesty in Syria. Then by taking a stand against Rome, a force they could not hope to beat, instead of entering into negotiations. As a result, Egypt believed itself yoked to Rome's plough with no chance of salvation until—oh munificent Ra!—the queen smuggles herself to Caesar wrapped in a rug, and overnight the balance of power swings again!"

It hung unsaid that Julius Caesar imagined that, in Cleopatra, he would be manipulating a soft, sweet puppet queen. . . .

"From the moment your son was born, Your Majesty, the people have embraced Caesarion as Egypt's heir. Nothing, I promise, has changed in the ten months you have been absent."

Cleopatra darted a glance across to the boy, who lay cradled in his nurse's arms, his rosebud lips slightly parted in sleep. Caesarion. Little Caesar. She smiled fondly. Who would suspect the child's exquisite public behaviour owed more to a splash of poppy

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juice on a sweetmeat than a well-trained royal disposition? Caesarion was a lusty two-year-old, with a lusty two-year-old's energy and a lusty two-year-old's lungs. His mother had no intention of curbing either. That boy was the future Pharaoh and his spirit would never be tamed. Indomitable through inheritance, that spirit would soar. *Higher than his father's eagle it would rise. And the breadth of its shadow would be unsurpassed. . . .*

"You wouldn't lie to me, Benet?"

Why should the common masses back her when half her council rejected Caesarion's claim to royal blood and believed the queen wielded far too much power as it was? Power which should rightly be theirs—

The captain of archers looked deep into her eyes. "I would never lie to you, Your Royal Highness."

He knew full well that the eighteen-year-old chit who had mounted the throne on Ptolemy's death had not proved the pliable young thing these shadowy figures had hoped. A truth the Roman dictator had yet to discover. . . .

"Good." She flashed Benet a wicked grin. "Because the last man who betrayed me died the Death of One Thousand Cuts, the first slicing off his treacherous tongue."

His eyes smiled. "A point I shall bear in mind in the future—*Holy Ra!*"

Cleopatra's head turned in the direction his, and fifty others, were turned. For once she was unable to control her gasp of surprise. Renenutet, still wearing the silver mask of the cat, was standing, arms outstretched, on the roof of the House of Scribes. Her pleated linen gown billowed softly round her ankles in the sticky breeze.

"Renenutet!" The high priest's voice carried its full weight of authority. "Renenutet, in the name of Isis, I command you—"

The screams cut him off.

For a few ghastly seconds, Renenutet seemed to hang in the air. A white pleated cloud frozen against a backdrop of azure.

Then the billowing gown disappeared—

Kames was the first to react. In an instant, his soldiers had surrounded their queen, tried to hustle her through the nearest doorway for safety.

"Don't be ridiculous," she snapped. "It's not me that needs helping, it's Renenutet. Kames, take some men and see if you can do anything for her. Benet, go with him, if you will."

The captain of archers met her eye and nodded in mute understanding. If Renenutet's fall had proved fatal, it was from him that she wanted to hear it.

As the soldiers trotted off, their bronze helmets and greaves jangling, Cleopatra's instinct was for her child.

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"Take Caesarion home," she instructed his nurse.

She must remove him at once from this tainted scene.

"No, wait."

It would not do to have Pharaoh run from a crisis. Even if he was only a babe and fast asleep!

"Tuck this into his clothing instead."

She handed his nurse the amulet Renenutet had given her earlier.

"The sacred amulet of Isis," the priestess had hissed, her voice barely recognisable under the silver cat mask.

Flushed with the priesthood's recognition of the queen as Isis incarnate, the public attestation of their powerful support, Cleopatra had barely glanced at the tiny object when Renenutet pressed it into her palm.

"Set with carnelian," she'd whispered, "washed in a tincture of ankhamu flowers, fashioned from the trunk of a sacred sycamore tree."

This had been at the very start of today's ceremony, at the moment the priestess was supposed to pay homage to her queen and nothing else. To cover the delay, Renenutet pretended to disengage the panther tail which hung at her waist from Cleopatra's gold belt, as though the two had become somehow entangled.

"Isis is the goddess from whom all being arose," she murmured, her eyes glittering behind the metal mask. "From her feathers came light. From the brush of her wings came the air. She is the Enchantress, the Speaker of Spells, who protecteth the living and extendeth her protection even beyond, unto eternity."

Oh, Renenutet. You should have kept the amulet, Cleopatra thought, picturing the nightmare vision of Renenutet frozen in space. You should have kept the amulet to protect your own soul from self-destruction.

"Let the wings of Isis cover you instead, little Caesar," she whispered, stroking her son's soft, dark hair. She bent to kiss his cool, dry forehead and wondered how long the effects of the poppy juice would last. As she straightened, Kames and Benet came striding across the shaded courtyard, their white kilts swinging in unison. Their expressions said it all.

"I deeply regret, the priestess Renenutet has already begun her long journey to the West," Benet said softly.

The two men knelt beside the Pool of Purification and allowed the priests to splash their eyes with sacred water to wash away the contamination of having gazed upon a corpse. Cleopatra felt no disrespect. To have deferred the task would have been to taint the queen with their polluted sight.

Poor Renenutet, she thought. A suicide. Whose imperfect soul was destined to wander the dark paths of the Underworld forever.

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"I suppose we shall never know what drove her to take such drastic action," she added sadly.

"On the contrary," Benet said. "I know exactly what drove the poor woman across the Far Horizon."

He hesitated. Pursed his lips.

"Someone else's hands," he said quietly. "Renenutet, I regret to inform you, was murdered."

Whether for business or pleasure, the Field of Mars on which the temple complex stood was arguably one of the busiest places in Rome outside the Forum. Sited on a bend in the Tiber, it was home to seven other temples, as well as a whole host of public baths, theatres, race courses, and libraries, offering works of art to admire, tombs to revere, groves to picnic in, trees for the children to climb, steps on which bearded philosophers could debate the meaning of life, and open spaces for athletics. The air was never silent. Until now. Snake charmers stopped playing their flutes. Beggars' bowls ceased to rattle. Peddlers stopped hawking. Only the jackdaws continued to chatter.

As the dictator's concubine, esconced in the very villa from which his lawful wife had been evicted, Cleopatra was accustomed to being gawped at by the populace. Suddenly, like wasps to honey, they swarmed to the scene of the drama, but their interest, thank Horus, lay not in the dead priestess, rather in the bejewelled Egyptian whore. Cleopatra could handle that standing on her head. No person, living or dead, had ever witnessed a crack in her armour. They certainly would not do so today.

However! As the consort of the most powerful man in the Roman republic, she was also expecting a different kind of attention. Any minute, Caesar's legionaries would arrive.

She turned to Kames. "I assume from your contemptuous tutting that you disagree with Benet's conclusion?"

"Your Majesty, we *all* saw what happened," Kames replied. "There was no one else or we'd have seen them. With respect, that roof's flatter than the sole of my boot."

The queen turned to her young captain of archers and raised one finely plucked eyebrow in query.

Benet inhaled. Released his breath slowly. "Because of the angle at which the body was lying, because of *where* it was lying, close to the wall, because the blood which had dried round the head wound doesn't correspond with the copious amount of fresh blood inside her mask—all that adds up to only one thing. Renenutet was murdered."

Kames's bluster was shot out of the water. At last, he understood what the queen saw in Benet. Drawing himself up to his full height, he cleared his throat and squared his shoulders.

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"Benet's deductions are correct," he admitted. "Renenutet leapt off with arms outstretched, yet the body was found with one arm pinned beneath it. Likewise, when a person jumps they make a trajectory."

"A trajectory?" she queried.

"Imagine throwing a javelin or spear from that roof, Your Highness. This is the same principle. The body lands at the end of that arc. Renenutet, as Benet said, lies close in."

Kames dropped to his knees, his forehead touching the ground.

"Your Majesty, as a soldier I should have recognised the signs—"

How fortunate, Cleopatra thought, to have two such pillars to lean on. Benet, alert to nuances, unafraid to put forward an unpalatable theory. Kames, man enough to admit his mistakes. *Or clever enough to know he could no longer get away with the suicide theory . . . ?*

"Don't whip yourself, Kames," she said, bidding him rise. "You fell into the same trap we all did. You took Renenutet's death at face value."

Hobnail boots echoed on the Via Triumphalis, the rhythmic *clink-clink-clink* of scale armour, the jangle of bronze medallions as the legionaries drew closer. Grief and shock would no doubt set in later, but Pharaoh was raised to consider emotions an indulgence—never more so than in a crisis. As the centurion halted his troops, Cleopatra summarised the points in her mind.

The priestess Renenutet had been murdered.

Renenutet . . . priestess of Bast.

Bast . . . . . the gentle daughter of Isis.

Isis . . . . . Protectress of the Pharaoh.

Cleopatra steepled her fingers. More crimes than murder had been committed today. Sacrilege, for one. The sanctuary of the Great Goddess had been defiled by the spilling of blood. Furthermore, the outrage of Bast had been invoked by the assault on her priestess.

But worse than that, by embroiling the queen in this apparent suicide, someone had tried to pull the wool over Cleopatra's almond eyes.

And that was their biggest mistake.

In retrospect, she should have realised Caesar would not let it go at a lowly centurion.

Cleopatra studied the corded muscles of the man dismounting from his pure white stallion, noted the purple stripe on his tunic which pronounced him patrician. He had a strong face, a handsome face, and in spite of herself a shiver of desire rippled the length of her backbone. Contrary to rumours put about by certain viziers, the queen had only ever taken one lover, and that had

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been a matter of expediency. The gods do not bestow virginity for it to be taken lightly. The night she had had herself smuggled through enemy lines in a rug, knowing that if she was discovered her own kinsmen would cut her throat like a dog, was the night she had given herself to the Roman dictator.

Fast-track negotiations, some might say.

The regency had usurped the throne. Cleopatra was in exile, Alexandria was in the hands of the rioters, the palace in the hands of the Romans. To survive, she had had to act fast. Her first move was to throw her army of Syrian mercenaries behind Caesar. Afterwards—? Well, what greater assurance of Egypt's allegiance than the queen's precious virginity?

Men. Such fools, she thought. In seducing the young Cleopatra, Caesar believed he was annexing the rich lands of the Nile through the back door, a mission he could not hope to accomplish by force. But with his entrenched Roman attitudes towards women, he had not stopped to contemplate the alternative. That she might be using him. . . .

Within days, Cleopatra achieved her first goal. She conceived. In the simple act of giving him an heir, something Caesar was sorely lacking, the tables turned. By the time Caesarion was of an age to rule, his father would be dead. *And Rome would be annexed to Egypt, not the other way around!*

In a journey which had taken her from royal princess to queen to Pharaoh to goddess, Cleopatra quite literally held the power of the world in her hands.

The power felt good.

Nothing—and no one—would be allowed to change that.

Which wasn't to say her blood could not be stirred by a lopsided smile here or a bunched muscle there! Benet, although he did not know it, was one such contender. The patrician dismounting from his stallion, another.

"Your Highness," he murmured, making obeisance Egyptian-fashion.

"It is good to see you again, Mark Antony."

Nothing would come of these flirtations, of course. Cleopatra was neither stupid nor reckless—she had Caesar in the palm of her hand, and with it the eagle of Rome. But Caesar was old, he was bald, and, let's be frank, when it came to the art of love, his was more a quick sketch than an intricate fresco. Other decor could still be admired.

"Caesar salutes you," he said, rising, "and offers his escort to the queen, that she may return to the villa without incurring unwarranted scrutiny or gossip."

The weight of so much gold jewellery was exhausting her, the heat from the wig almost unbearable. But when Cleopatra smiled

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at Mark Antony, you would think she had just risen from her bath, calm and refreshed.

"The queen sends her grateful thanks to the mighty Caesar," she replied.

Heavenly Horus, she would need all her diplomatic skills here! Strictly speaking, she was a foreigner on Roman soil, subject to Roman law. If the most powerful man on earth decreed she must leave the Field of Mars, then leave she must, and in the three years they'd been lovers Cleopatra had never gone head-to-head against the dictator's wishes. Let him think he was in control. Illusion was everything.

"But the queen has no desire to impinge upon Caesar's generosity," she told Mark Antony. "The queen shall be remaining at the temple."

The tall patrician blinked. "Is that wise, Your Majesty?" Likewise, only a fool would go against *Cleopatra's* wishes. Julius Caesar would not wish to lose his hold on the Nile's treasures just because some clot upset his mistress!

"Wise is a contentious word, Mark Antony."

She linked her arm through his and led him to the shade of the Pool of Peace, where papyrus plants swayed in the hot, sultry breeze. The silvery sound of sistrums filled the air and fragrant incense filtered out from the temple.

"Was it wise of the queen," she asked as handmaidens fluttered up with plates of fresh fruit, "to devalue Egypt's currency by one-third in order to keep export sales strong? Or a gamble which happened to pay off? Was it wise of her to have her portrait stamped on our coinage, to prove to the world that Egypt's economy was stable in the hands of a woman? Or was it nothing more than female vanity?"

Cleopatra dabbled her hands in the cool, clear water.

"For that matter, was it wise of the queen to muster an army of mercenaries to fight her own brother? Or simply the banner waving of a power-mad female with no hope of success?"

"Life, I agree, is entirely a matter of perspective," he said, a twinkle lighting his eyes. "Which is precisely why I am now offering my services to escort you personally to the safety of Caesar's villa."

Cleopatra bit into a peach. "Your concern is touching, Mark Antony. Unfortunately, it would be disrespectful for me to leave until the rites are over."

When the Roman general smiled, the lines round his eyes fell into deep crinkles. "The ceremony finished an hour ago," he pointed out, selecting a cherry.

"To honour Isis, yes, but we have yet to venerate the cobra god-

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dess and sing the hymn to Nut," she replied, and watched as he bought himself time by slicing an apple.

Mark Antony had not bought the lie. True, he was ignorant of the rites conducted here, but he was keenly aware that a surprisingly large number of Roman women made devotions at this shrine. Isis had become popular in Rome, more so since the queen's arrival last September, when additional aspects had been added. Bast, for instance. Hathor the cow. Plus numerous other female deities who, together, presided over motherhood and love, beauty and healing, all the issues important to women, Roman or otherwise.

Mark Antony might not know the details. But he knew, dammit, when a ceremony was over and done with. Selecting a date, the Roman general changed tack.

"Listen to the baying crowd," he said. "Perhaps the queen does not appreciate how much resentment her royal presence causes in the city . . . ?"

"The queen knows *exactly* how Republicans view the concubine and her bastard son," she said tartly. "Keep the mistress—flaunt her, even—is the general consensus. After all, the Queen of Egypt is a prize for Caesar to parade, is she not? Just don't play house with the whore."

Another lie. Marital scandal was a minor issue, the cause of gossip rather than resentment. The real fear among the Senate—Mark Antony included—was for the future of their hard-won republic. They suspected Cleopatra of dripping poison in the dictator's ear every night to serve her own ends.

They were not wrong.

Come next March—no later than April—she would have Julius Caesar declare himself king of Rome, with herself crowned as queen. Upon his death (and who knows how quickly that might come to pass) Caesarion would inherit the title.

Then all of Rome's dominions would belong to Egypt. . . .

The scent of the oil of marjoram drenching her wig wafted in the sultry air. The gems glistened like raindrops.

"As to the mood of the crowd, my answer is this," she said carefully. "Rome likes its spectacles. I say, let the people enjoy this one."

Renenutet was murdered on the sacred soil of Isis wearing the insignia of Bast. Now that Cleopatra was to be venerated as Isis, this comprised a triple sacrilege and the perpetrator must be punished. Pharaoh could not simply walk away this afternoon. It was her duty to stay and see justice served. In any case, she thought sadly, she owed it to Renenutet to find her killer. Renenutet should not journey into the West without the feather of truth on her shoulder. The journey was long enough as it was.

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She held out a small, sandalled foot.

The sparring light in the general's eyes died. She inched her foot out further. His expression darkened. There was no mistaking the queen's message.

Or defying it. . . .

As Mark Antony knelt to kiss the royal toe, anger and outrage pulsated from every Roman pore. He! an aristocrat! a general! one of the world's greatest powerbrokers! had been . . . *dismissed!* There was a very different glint in his eye as he rose.

She watched him stride away, barking orders to the centurion to keep the crowd back. One day, she reflected, this man would return for more of the same. His type always did.

And Cleopatra would be waiting.

Inside the sanctuary, prayers were being said for Renenutet's journey into the Afterlife. Yntef, Tamar, and the rest of the attendants had lost no time in shaving their eyebrows. They would have done this had just a temple cat died, much less one of Bast's holy disciples.

The atmosphere inside the sanctuary pulsed with emotion.

Cleopatra glanced at the sky. The sticky midsummer heat could not last and the first rumble of thunder could be heard in the distance. Excellent. She would be able to interpret the storm as Bast's anger made manifest. Thunder would be the cat goddess's growling, lightning her ferocious spitting. Magic and superstition played a pivotal role in Egyptian life. Only a fool would fail to capitalise.

"Benet. Kames." She beckoned them over. "No one is to suspect this was not a straightforward suicide." If the Romans sniffed murder, this would become a civil investigation. Much better to keep these things in-house. "We will deal with this quietly, between the three of us. Do either of you have any clues as to who killed her?"

"None," Benet admitted. "But we know Renenutet was killed inside the temple."

Cleopatra's eyes flashed. Was there no end to the insult? "How can you be sure?"

"There is only one place on this site where people must bare their feet, even Your Majesty. Inside the sanctuary. Renenutet was barefoot."

Cleopatra picked up a sloe-eyed kitten mewing at her feet. The kitten began to rattle like a chariot over cobblestones, snuggling its head into her collarbone.

"Anything else?" she asked.

"Dried blood around the head wound suggests Renenutet died an hour before the simulated suicide—"

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"How do you know?"

"Dead bodies don't bleed," Kames explained. "The blood was probably that of a chicken, poured into the mask at the last moment to make it look fresh. Also, her skin was cool."

Slowly, Cleopatra laid down the kitten. If Renenutet had spoken to her at the beginning of the ceremony, when she passed across the amulet, but had been dead for some time after Benet examined the body, there was only one conclusion. She died *during* the ritual. Meaning the killer had contrived to use the Queen of Egypt as his alibi.

Another mistake.

Beside the Pool of Peace, with butterflies and bees swarming round the fragrant flowers in the urns and thunderclaps booming ever closer, Cleopatra's memory travelled backwards in time.

It returned her to the soaring temple. Closing her eyes, she saw its star-studded ceiling, just as she had seen it earlier, the dynamic wall paintings flickering beneath the flaming torches. In her mind she once more inhaled the sacred incense, a rich blend of frankincense and myrrh, cedar and gum arabic, juniper, cinnamon, and sweet flag. Her ears replayed the lazy beat of the drums—*boom, boom, boom-a-doom-a-dum-dum.* She was mounting the dais again, only everything now moved in slow motion.

"Homage to thee, Isis," the choir sang, *"whose names are manifold and whose forms are holy. Gracious is thy face."*

At the time, Cleopatra had hardly listened, concerned only that she had won over so powerful a body as the priesthood. With their support, the vipers in her council could scheme until the sun set in the north and still not get their hands on the throne.

"You are the north wind that bloweth in our nostrils. Your word is truth."

Beside the pool, Cleopatra's head pounded. From the heat, from the weight of the gold, from the hot, heavy wig. From wondering how on earth Renenutet could have been killed beneath her very nose. She concentrated on reliving the ceremony . . .

"O, Isis of a thousand names, who watcheth over us . . ."

The nightingales had finished their chant. Silence had descended over the sanctuary. The flames on the torches had been dimmed. From a side door, a score of acolytes entered, each carrying a small gilded cage in reverent, outstretched hands. Gliding in long pleated skirts, they mounted the steps of the platform. The cages were lined up, side by side on the floor, the eyes of the occupants flashing like fire in the gloom. With a synchronised click, the catches were sprung and twenty temple cats tumbled onto the dais in honour of Bast. Renenutet, Cleopatra remembered, had gone forward to feed them.

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She recalled, too, how Renenutet and Tamar assisted the High Priest in his divination. Supporting him when he fell into his trance. At his side when he pronounced how beneficent Anubis had shown him how the heart of the Pharaoh was happy, how the heart of Osiris was glad, and how the two halves of Egypt would always be one.

"May Isis embrace you in her peace, Yntef," Cleopatra had replied solemnly, using the *ankh* to make the ritual gesture over his head. "For the *ka* of her High Priest is holy and Anubis has shown him the truth. The heart of Isis is full of joy at her servant's devotion."

Translation: Yntef would be richly rewarded for throwing his support behind the throne.

She pursed her lips in concentration. Remembering how Yntef, unsteady still from his trance, had been helped away by Tamar as Renenutet bestowed upon the imperial wig the sacred crown of Isis, the solar disc cradled between the twin horns of the moon. The priestess's breathing beneath the replica mask had been laboured, Cleopatra recalled. But she was certainly very much alive—

"Your Majesty?" Benet's shadow fell over the pool.

"Ah, Benet, just the man!" The royal headache had vanished. The gold weighed as a pectoral of feathers round her neck, the plaited wig a gossamer veil.

"Have you worked out how the trick was done?"

The captain of archers returned the smile. "I have indeed, Your Royal Highness."

"Good," she said. "Because if you can tell me how, I can tell you where and when."

Between them, it should tell her who.

The how had been ingenious. The trick as audacious as Cleopatra had ever known.

"The key," Benet explained, "is a metal spike hammered into the brickwork at the junction of the wall of the House of Scribes and its flat roof. Wrapped round the spike were these." He held out a few coarse fibres of hemp from a rope.

An elaborate pantomime had been staged, he explained, which hinged upon no lesser person than the Queen of Egypt witnessing what was supposed to have been a dramatic suicide. Renenutet on the roof, her arms outstretched. Renenutet jumping to her death.

The killer, though, had reckoned without Benet.

Benet was the queen's spy and spies never take one damn thing at face value.

"The murder was carefully planned," he told her. "During the ceremony, that spike was hammered into the brickwork and a

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short piece of rope attached to it, with a noose at one end."

Cleopatra's heart twisted. When that first lazy drumbeat began, Renenutet had no idea her thread of life had less than an hour to unravel. Except . . . the priestess of Bast had sensed danger! It had been with force and urgency that the sacred amulet of Isis had been pressed into the queen's hand. At the time, Cleopatra dismissed it as a token of Renenutet's acceptance of herself as queen of Earth and Heaven. She should have realised. No priestess, especially one of Renenutet's standing, would need to pretend her sacred panther's tail had become entangled had the gift been open and aboveboard! Renenutet had passed the amulet in secret.

"Now I shall tell you when and where Renenutet was killed," she said.

After she passed Cleopatra the amulet, the ceremony had continued as scheduled. The choir extolled the virtues of Isis (in other words, a public proclamation of the priesthood's support), then the lights dimmed.

That was the moment Renenutet's thread was severed.

As she slipped out of the sanctuary to fetch the procession from the Sacred Cattery, two people were waiting. As one snatched off the silver mask, the other threw a sheet over her head.

"What odds her skull was crushed by her own metal mask?" Cleopatra said. "The sheet would contain any splatters of blood."

The killers had no time to waste cleaning floors. One was already clad in ritual robes. All she had to do was don Renenutet's mask and run swiftly to the Sacred Cattery. Only a few seconds would have been lost, and while she was fetching the feline procession, *her accomplice carried the body away, arranging it* beneath the House of Scribes.

"She?" Benet queried.

"Definitely," Cleopatra confirmed. "The killer had to impersonate Renenutet for the remainder of the ceremony. Only a servant of Bast could possibly have known the routine."

In due course, when the temple cats had been released from their cages on the dais and the lights went up again, who would suspect that Bast's representative was not Renenutet? It was only thinking back that Cleopatra remembered how laboured the priestess's breathing had been when she lowered the horned headdress on the royal wig. The killer's hands had shaken slightly as well, she recalled. Not from the heat or exertion. But from nervousness!

"Afterwards," Benet said, "the impersonator climbed up on the roof. She slipped the noose from the rope round her ankle. Waited until Her Majesty was looking. And jumped."

No wonder Renenutet seemed to hang in the sky, Cleopatra thought. That was precisely what had happened. The rope sus-

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pended the killer in midair. Dangling like a fish on a line.

"The accomplice at the upstairs window in the House of Scribes threw another noose around her wrist," Benet said, "cut the rope around her ankle, and hauled her inside. Then they filled the cat mask with animal blood and stuffed it on Renenutet's head. Plenty of time before anyone else arrived at the scene."

For several moments, Cleopatra listened to the thunder, watched jagged spears of lightning cut through the charcoal sky. Lost in contemplation, she did not even notice as the first heavy drops of rain fell. Finally, she summoned the head of her bodyguard and together all three withdrew into the shelter of the painted portico.

"Kames, I want you to observe the priestesses of Bast and, discreetly, mark you, isolate the one with rope burns on her wrist and ankle. I suspect they are covered by bandages."

Cleopatra almost regretted doubting the head of her bodyguard's loyalty. Then again, to make assumptions about even her most trustworthy cohorts was to open herself up to danger.

"Her accomplice will be a priest or a scribe," she added. "Someone with regular access to both buildings, strong enough to heave corpses around, and he'll probably have a bloodstained sheet beneath his bed."

The killers would not have expected events to move so swiftly. They would not have needed to take extra precautions at this stage.

In less than an hour, Kames returned. "A novice priestess called Berenice and her lover, Ity, have been quietly removed from their duties," he said. "Shall I send them to the royal torturer for confession?"

Cleopatra shook her head. "Have your men smuggle them out of the temple, take them into the hills. Oh, and Kames . . ."

"Your Majesty."

"Be sure they bury the bodies deep." As he left, she turned to her captain of archers. "Benet, I want you to remove a few handfuls of silver from the temple treasury, also a small but precious statuette. Have it put about that Berenice and Ity stole them and ran off."

Caesar might not agree, but this temple was every bit as much a part of Egypt as Alexandria itself. Pharaoh's justice would be served—only today it would be served in secret. Only a few handpicked soldiers would ever know Berenice and Ity had killed Renenutet, and she imagined the ill-fated lovers would be regretting the deed long before Kames's men had finished with them.

"Why?" Benet asked. "Why did they kill Renenutet?"

Cleopatra glanced across at her son, struggling out of his drugged sleep, and pictured the amulet tucked inside his clothing.

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An amulet set with carnelian, washed in the tincture of ankhamu flowers and fashioned from the trunk of a sacred sycamore tree . . .

"I doubt we shall ever know, Benet," she said, tapping him cheerfully on the arm. "Now, off you go and rob the treasury, there's a good boy."

She snapped her fingers and two handmaidens scampered forward. "Fetch my litter," she ordered. "We shall return to Caesar's villa."

I do believe Mark Antony has stood in the pouring rain for long enough.

Five days afterwards, Cleopatra was seated next to Caesar as guest of honour at the games inaugurated to commemorate Rome's victories in Gaul. As befitting the queen of the upper and lower Nile, she wore a gown shot with silver threads, a headdress set with amethysts, and enough gold jewellery to turn Midas green with envy. The one hundred thousand Romans crammed into the surrounding tiers ought not be disappointed, she thought happily.

Syrian lions roared from the pits. Baited bulls bellowed, bears snarled, wolves howled, elephants trumpeted their rage. First in the arena, a half-starved tiger, to be pitted against a trident and net. The human did not stand a chance. After that, beast fight followed beast fight in rapid succession, and Cleopatra's gorge rose at the senseless shedding of blood, the death of so many splendid specimens.

Then it was the turn of the gladiators, their swords and lances gleaming in the sun. She watched, impassive, as steel clashed against steel. Blood spurted, bodies writhed, heels kicked up clouds of sand as Roman fought Roman to the death. From the corner of her almond eye, Cleopatra watched Caesar size up the crowd. How much did they back him? he was wondering. How far would they follow him? Would they accept a monarchy in place of their hard-earned republic?

As always, Cleopatra pretended not to care. She slipped her small hand into Caesar's. Showed the people—and the Senate—that it was Caesar she loved. Only Caesar . . .

To the backdrop of trumpets, attendants dressed as gods of the Underworld hauled the mangled corpses away in chains, threw fresh sand over the blood. The crowd was insatiable. Stamping their feet, they bayed for the next treat, the despatching of murderers and rapists by wild animals.

There seemed to be some activity at one of the gates. Guards conferred hastily. Glanced at the queen. Conferred again. Then one of them made a decision. Marching over to Cleopatra, he pressed his clenched fist to his breast in salute.

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"One of the prisoners insists there has been a mistake, my lady. We don't believe this is the case, but—well, he is Egyptian and swears Your Majesty will vouch for him."

"Bring him over," she said in her perfect Latin.

Two guards frogmarched the prisoner across. One eye was closed, his body bruised where he'd put up a fight.

"Your Highness," he gabbled, "tell them they've got the wrong man. Last night some thugs set upon me and the next thing I know, I'm here. In a cage full of murderers awaiting execution."

Whatever did you expect, she wondered silently. You plant seeds of dissension in the minds of two idealistic young lovers and incite them to murder Renenutet under the queen's nose. She leaned closer, pretending to examine his features. Features that fully expected to kill, get away with it—and then be shown the queen's mercy.

"I have never seen this man before in my life," she told the guard.

"But Your Majesty—! It's me, Yntef! Your High Priest."

Cleopatra smiled pityingly at Caesar. "My High Priest is on a boat bound for Alexandria," she murmured. "To take up his new promotion."

Let's face it, one shaven-headed Egyptian looks the same as another to a disinterested Roman. Only the temple servants would know that Yntef had been replaced. And even they would not know the reason. . . .

She watched impassively as Yntef was dragged away, protesting at the top of his voice. The crowd loved it. They would love it more, she thought, if they knew the full story.

Her mind travelled back to the beginning.

Coincidence that it was here, in Rome, that the priesthood chose to throw their support behind Cleopatra? Hardly. Had this happened in Egypt, that would have been different. But it all took place in the back of beyond, and why?

Because the priesthood did not back Cleopatra at all.

That most powerful of organisations had thrown its weight behind the traitors within her own council. Oh yes. The bastards planned to have her assassinated in Rome, knowing damn well the finger of blame would point to the Senate, who hated Cleopatra with a vengeance.

Just before the ceremony, Renenutet must have discovered Yntef's treachery. That was the reason she pressed the amulet into her hands. Set with Isis's sacred carnelian, washed in a tincture of the goddess's consecrated ankhamu flowers, and fashioned out of the trunk of her sacred sycamore tree, no object was more holy, more sanctified, more precious in Renenutet's eyes than that which invoked the Great Mother's protection.

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The amulet had been the warning. That was why she'd passed it in secret. But that loyalty cost Renenutet her life.

Yntef knew she was on to him. Enlisting the help of two sympathisers to the cause (heaven knows how many more vipers there were in the nest, but Benet's skills would root them out and Kames's men would do the rest), the High Priest was forced to eliminate Renenutet in a way that would not arouse suspicion. Set some distance from the temple, the House of Scribes allowed ample time for his accomplices to stage their pantomime then pretend to come rushing up with the others.

Once Cleopatra realised who had killed the priestess of Bast, the motive behind the murder was obvious. Yntef would have known if anyone other than Renenutet had been holding him as he came out of his trance. That meant Yntef was in on it.

Oh, dear Yntef. All those hymns and blessings and public acceptance of the queen as Isis incarnate, how they backfired. You see, it's all very well to pretend the priesthood backs Cleopatra—provided Cleopatra is dead. Now they've made their support public, the priesthood has no choice but to stand by their decision. The die has been cast. The queen wins. Best of all, Yntef's failure will have created division among the priesthood and the council in a way that Cleopatra could only ever have dreamed of. Each would now suspect the others of selling them out. Trust among the conspirators would crumble like sand.

Instinctively, her hand reached for the amulet round her neck. In bestowing Isis's protection, Renenutet had saved the queen's life at the expense of her own, but she would not go unrewarded. Plans for a sumptuous tomb were already being drawn by the queen's architect.

The rewards also extended to the spiritual plane.

Two of Renenutet's killers lay in unmarked graves, where, without proper burial rites, their souls were doomed to wander the Halls of the Lost for eternity. Now the third member of the trio was poised to look retribution square in the face. Kames's men had done well in delivering him to the Roman arena.

With a snarl, a panther bounded into the arena.

Bribes had ensured the beast had been tormented with prods, whips, and firebrands, and it had also been starved and denied water. Yntef screamed. Behind her, the crowd cheered and stomped on the wooden boards of the amphitheatre, unaware of what Yntef was seeing.

The figure of Bast incarnate. Leaping to avenge her devoted disciple.

As the panther sat back and licked its bloody lips, Cleopatra felt a brush of soft, white feathers against her cheek. Once again, the wings of Isis were beating in victory. ●

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Acts of Revenge

by Mark SaFranko

Mark SaFranko wears nearly every literary hat imaginable: playwright, poet, short story writer, novelist. And he's accomplished in each field. His plays have been produced at such New York theaters as the Samuel Beckett and the Village Gate; his poetry and short stories have appeared in dozens of major magazines; and his two mystery novels, *The Favor* (1987) and *Hopler's Statement* (1998), received strong reviews. This is the New Jersian's second story for *EQMM*. ✝

It was after I'd sold the screenplay that it really all began. Who was the first to strike? I'm going to leave it up to you to decide. But before you do, sir, let me backtrack, to set the stage, so to speak. . . .

We met back East, Sherry and me, not long after I graduated from a podunk state college where I did nothing whatsoever to distinguish myself in any way. It was a typical upstate New York summer, lots of humidity, buckets of rain, too many dead hours to count. I was treading water as assistant manager of a second-rate men's clothing store—for the time being, until I got my bearings and figured out what to do with my freshly minted degree—and Sherry was in the loans division of a bank. In other words, I was lost, and maybe she was, too. We bumped into each other for the first time in the park early that July when each of us was on our lunch break. Being wiry and brunette she wasn't exactly my physical type, but we happened to be sitting on the same bench and we couldn't help but strike up a conversation. Actually, it was me who talked first. I made a remark about the book she was reading—I was a fan of Zola, too. If she could find her way into someone that good, I figured, she had to be worth knowing. We hit it off, pretty much from that moment. But I also sensed before long that there was something a little off in Sherry—sensed, deep in the recesses of my brain, where I wouldn't ever fully admit it to myself, that she might do something to me one day. But maybe I was wrong. How can you ever really know something like that for sure? You can say you had a hunch, but

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nine times out of ten the hunch is nonsense.

After that first day we had an unspoken standing date, same time, same place, Monday through Friday. Even then I was obsessed with the movies. Every other night the two of us would hit a multiplex or an art house, and if we didn't, I was sitting at home in front of a video. I was miserable at the clothing store. Sherry was miserable at the bank. I confided to her what I sometimes dreamed: that I got out of this nowhere town and became somebody. Anybody would do. Where did I want to go? *There's only one place I ever wanted to go, Sherry, and that's California.* The idea appealed to her, too.

There was nothing holding us back East. We each came from the kind of fractured, dysfunctional family where we wouldn't be missed by anyone if we moved to Tasmania. So piece by piece we laid out our plans under the elm trees, packed up everything we owned, and shoved off in the frigid dawn the following New Year's Day in my secondhand Honda, driving straight across the country, shedding clothes like our pasts, with a few deviations for a bit of sightseeing. The Grand Canyon was worth it, both of us agreed on that. So was Vegas. Within days of reaching Los Angeles we had jobs. On the weekends we hit every corny tourist trap from San Luis Obispo all the way down to Oceanside. We did Knott's Berry Farm, Disneyland, the Hearst Castle, and damned near everything in-between. Sometimes we just sat in the sun and couldn't believe we were there.

At first I decided to give acting a shot. There I was, in the Land of the Miracle, the city of the one-in-a-million chance, so why not? I auditioned for anything and everything, for anybody and everybody who would agree to see me. I'd done some theater in school, thought I had at least as much charisma as some big Hollywood stars. After a couple years' worth of humiliation, when all I'd managed to come up with was a handful of days as an extra, I'd had enough. But my dreams weren't dead. The other thing I'd always wanted to be was a writer.

Sherry and I lived all over the place in those early years—Eagle Rock, Glendale, Venice. Every night I'd sit at the electric Smith-Corona (this of course was in the days before I could afford a computer) and bang away at the scripts and stories that were one day going to make me rich, if not famous. I wanted it badly. I prayed for it. It would come; it was only a matter of time. On the weekends Sherry would read what I'd written and then give me her comments and suggestions. She was my editor, if not my flat-out collaborator.

All the while, of course, I went on working odd jobs. Movie-house usher, phone-book deliveryman, proofreader at an ad agency. As for Sherry, she took on the heavier, grind-it-out positions, as every-

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thing from greeter in a seafood restaurant, which she wasn't cut out for, to telemarketer, to toy salesperson on the Universal lot (she wasn't exactly made for those, either), to paper-pusher for the U.S. arm of a giant international telephone company located near the airport. That was the one that stuck.

Lucky for me, she didn't mind doing the lion's share of the lucre-earning stuff. We were thousands of miles from home, we were on our own, we had each other. We could do whatever we wanted to do, in whatever arrangement we chose to do it in—nobody cared. She'd become part of my dream, too.

By now, of course, I'd learned a lot more about this woman I was living with. Sherry was dutiful if not overly imaginative, steadfast and loyal if not exciting. She was certainly attractive, but somewhat dour, even depressive at times, the kind of person who wouldn't have a friend in the world if I didn't prod her. Sometimes I was amazed that she'd taken the great leap west with me, until finally I figured out that it wasn't the adventure she wanted, it was *me.* If it weren't for me, she'd still be back East marking time in that bank. But curiously, and despite her inhibitions, she was good in bed—and I mean very good. And I knew I could count on her to follow me to the ends of the earth.

She was a hit at her new job, which kept her tucked away in a cubicle analyzing financial trends, and that allowed us to eventually land in Santa Monica, which was where we always wanted to be since it's smack on the ocean. Sherry and I had a thing for the sea, so long as it was the Pacific. We snagged a third-floor apartment with a small terrace and a view of the Ferris wheel on the pier and the spectacular sunsets. We loved that place, down to the cracks in the walls left by some earthquake. By this time it never occurred to us to think of going anywhere else. We were staying forever.

Then, one day, after years of trying and getting absolutely nowhere, it happened—I sold a screenplay. *By the Throat* was one-third horror, one-third drama, another third comedy, and all cheese when you peered beneath the slick surface. After all those countless rejections I'd finally figured out what to give them. It wasn't one of those million-dollar gigs that will get you a life-story profile in the *Los Angeles Times,* but I did bring down in the mid five figures for the sixth draft, which, my grandiose fantasies notwithstanding, was more than I ever imagined I could actually earn as a writer. To boot, the check cleared. The Burbank-based production company, a relative newcomer with a smattering of decent credits, was even threatening to place the thing into immediate turnaround. Like a restless dog on a leash, I began to sniff everything in the air—a legitimate credit (even if *By the Throat* went straight to video), an agent, a career.

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The first thing I nailed was the agent. His name was Rubinstein and he ran a stable that included at least a few clients, both actors and writers, with recognizable names. We shook hands on a deal that he would shop me all over Hollywood—I wasn't going to have to hawk myself anymore. Of course, once the movie was in the can it would be easier, and it certainly looked like that was going to happen.

Sherry and I celebrated at the hottest restaurant in town, a sushi joint across from the beach, complete with miniature waterfall and Zen meditation garden. Neither of us could quite believe my turn of luck. It was as if we were asleep, moving through a pleasant dream.

Across the teakwood table Sherry's eyes were riveted on me. The flame from the ersatz torch on the tabletop had cast her face in a gloomy half-light. I knew her well enough by now to guess what she was probably thinking: *I've supported you all along. Now it's your turn to do something for me. . . .*

"Do you think maybe we should get mar—"

I didn't let her finish. She'd hinted at marriage a few times over the years and I'd managed to dodge the hint, but since I sold the script I could sense the pressure intensifying. Did she never believe I'd succeed in the first place? Was she afraid of being left behind now that it appeared I was going somewhere?

What I cut her off with was, "Thanks for sticking with it all these years." Nothing more. I wasn't about to marry anyone yet. Not now, especially not now. After all, it had taken me so painfully long to get to this point. It wasn't that I didn't love Sherry, but . . . didn't I deserve the freedom my success would buy before being tied down forever? Hell, we'd probably get there one day—what was the hurry?

Before Sherry had the opportunity to convey disappointment, or to castigate me silently with those frightened doe eyes of hers, I looked away, out the window, at the tourists snapping photos of each other against the palm trees across the street, and changed the subject. . . .

You might say the very first act of revenge was committed then and there. *But who acted first?* Like I said at the very beginning, I'll leave it up to you to decide.

A few days later, Goldenline Pictures set up a meeting between the director and me to go over the script of *By the Throat* before preproduction began. At this point it looked like the shoot would happen sometime in the spring, the first of three Goldenline productions planned for the year. Todd Andlein lived an hour up the coast in Ventura, and I set out one pristine December morning before Sherry left for work. Our tête-à-tête went well, better than I could have anticipated. I was impressed with Andlein's attention

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to detail, and that Goldenline thought enough of the screenplay to set me up with a pro who had two cable movies under his belt. We sat behind his ranch house beneath the fat fruit hanging on his orange and lemon trees and talked over coffee about what I'd intended on every single page. Andlein seemed a decent enough sort; he requested only minor changes in what I'd laid down. We knocked off just before two since he had to tend to a business call from New York.

I was flying high. It was *happening* for me, this time it was really happening. It wasn't just a pile of rejections and a pathetic pipe dream anymore, like it is for most wannabes. I decided to take the coast highway back to Santa Monica just to savor the moment. It was one of those spectacular Southern California days that always convinced me I was right to have made the move West, no matter what happened—seventy-six balmy degrees and not a cloud in the sky, while back East the first major blizzard of the season was grinding life to a halt from Buffalo to the Catskills. Cruising through the boundless vegetable fields of Camarillo, I rolled down the windows and pumped up the volume on Gilberto Gil. In the distance the wide cerulean Pacific shimmered like a field of diamonds. I was happy to be alive. How could I not be?

There was nothing to rush back to Santa Monica for. I took my time driving along the ocean, drinking in the paradisiacal scenery, feeling the clean salty wind blow through my hair, taking a breather on the shoulder from time to time to let an impatient semi get by. At Zuma I pulled into Starbucks, grabbed a newspaper and a grande cappuccino, and sat at a table outside near the sandbox and slide set up for the poor saps with kids.

I was halfway through an article about a tennis match in Germany when I glanced up and saw her. Our eyes locked: She was blond, beautiful, and she couldn't have been more than twenty-four, twenty-five years old. There was a half-empty plastic bottle of spring water on the table in front of her. Her hair was pulled back and twisted into one of those heavy Nordic braids that for some reason I've always been a sucker for. She was wearing a Pepperdine University sweatshirt, royal blue spandex shorts, and immaculate white track shoes. At first I didn't notice the super-thin gold ring embedded in her right nostril, but when I did, it told me something about her—I didn't know at that point exactly what. The nose ring notwithstanding, she was the perfect Hollywood fantasy, the tan, long-legged goddess who exists as an archetypal symbol inside the psyche of every straight guy who ever sets foot in California. Those goddesses aren't real. This one was. She must have smelled the luck on me because she smiled. I smiled back.

As if it was meant to happen, we started talking. Her name was Blair. A nice name, it went perfectly with the day, and I told her

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so. I stood her to an iced coffee, and managed to slip in a word about my recent good fortune as a screenwriter. With luck like this, I laughed, who could tell, maybe I'd end up directing one day. . . .

All along I knew what I was doing. By this time she'd moved over to my table. She'd arrived recently from San Diego, was just getting her start as an actress. "I just held my breath and dove straight into the talent pool," she kept saying. At one point in the conversation she turned and pointed at the canyon behind us. She was living back there, in a rental courtesy of her father, an executive in the aircraft business. I'd never been inside one of those homes, I said, but I was curious. Well, the two of us just happened to be free for the afternoon. She invited me to come on over, because it was very interesting back there—with a little luck, we might catch a glimpse of a coyote or a rattlesnake. . . .

She climbed into her Beemer, and I followed her in my car. Her place wasn't ten minutes away. I couldn't tell you much about it, because I wasn't exactly paying attention. I stayed for a couple of hours, and when it was over I knew I'd crossed a certain invisible line. On the trip back to Santa Monica, I realized I'd probably made a mistake giving out my real name and phone number. But in the weakness of the moment I figured that maybe I'd want to repeat the experience. Who wouldn't? Blair was gorgeous. We'd had an awesome time in bed. I was only thirty-three years old. My life was ahead of me, wasn't it?

Thursday evening a couple of weeks later, when I got home from my jog, Sherry was perched rigidly on the sofa, hands clasped in her lap. She was still in her business attire. I knew something was wrong the second I set eyes on her.

"Your little friend called," she announced without rancor in her tiny voice, the tiny, helpless voice I'd only heard once or twice in all the time we'd been together, though I could detect the emotion roiling behind the calmly delivered words.

Of course I knew straight off who she was talking about. Now, over the years I'd made lots of passing friends and acquaintances and contacts in the industry and on its periphery, and Sherry had never been suspicious or jealous. Something must have happened in her conversation with my "little friend" that raised her antennae.

I opened my mouth to answer, but no words came out; instead I felt myself flushing red in the face. That marked the end of the conversation. Sherry got up, walked through the kitchen, and disappeared into the bedroom. She shut the door. I didn't see her for the rest of the evening, until I ventured in to take a shower and get ready for bed. She was still awake, still in her suit, lying on the bedspread staring at the ceiling. By this time I'd settled on a course of action. I concocted a lame story about who my "little

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friend" was, and tried my damnedest to pretend that nothing at all had happened between us, that we'd only been making a business connection. I couldn't very well ask what Blair said, could I?

As I moved gingerly around the bedroom, my brain racing a hundred miles an hour, Sherry remained as silent and inscrutable as a sphinx. Finally she said, in barely a whisper: *"How could you do it to me, Ian? Especially after all we've been through together? How could you do it?"*

"How could I do what to you, honey? What are you talking about?"

"Don't, Ian. Don't."

No matter what, I felt I had to stand my ground.

"Nothing happened between me and this girl, like I said. She's just some mooch looking to hitch onto a winner. Why don't you believe me?"

Her accusation and my bogus denials hung like poisonous clouds in the otherwise perfect California night. For a long time now I'd harbored a secret fear that there was something seriously wrong with Sherry. It was her tendency to withdraw into herself, to brood, to respond flatly to most stimuli other than me that were the red flags. But I'd always known that as long as I stayed beside her, her emotional equilibrium would remain intact. In the wake of my escapade with Blair, though, all bets were off. But now wasn't the time to insist that she see a shrink.

And hey—maybe I needed to see a shrink, too.

To my surprise, nothing happened. Nothing at all. Sherry'd apparently bought my story. The next morning she was back to her old self; she reported to her job, and I went back to my latest screenplay, a piece I'd been working on for months on paper, years in my head. This baby was going to be my masterpiece, the script that would launch me like a rocket into another tax bracket and set me up in a multi-million-dollar palace on the Malibu shoreline. Set in Cuba around the time of the Castro revolution, it was swarming with larger-than-life characters like Hemingway and Lansky and Sinatra and Kennedy. The Hollywood whores would be frothing at the mouth for the roles I was going to serve up. I planned on ordering Rubinstein to shop *Sugar Cane* directly to only the biggest, hottest names in the business. Come some Oscar night in the not-too-distant future, it would be me, Ian McGarron, who'd be walking off with at least one of those gilded statuettes. Hell, I even had half of my speech written.

The notion of calling Blair crossed my mind more than once. The memory of our magical afternoon in her canyon rental kept coming back to me like expensive perfume on a soft breeze. But I didn't pick up the phone. Blair wasn't going anywhere, I figured,

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and my time would come again; besides, I was wary of nudging Sherry over the edge. The fact was, I loved her.

It was two weeks later, when I was well into the third draft of *Sugar Cane,* that I realized maybe my transgression hadn't been forgotten after all. When we first came to California the groundwork of our relationship had been laid: Sherry would shop for food since I hated wheeling a cart around the supermarket, and I'd do the household chores—laundry and cleaning—since I was around the apartment more often than she was. After the night Blair called, the supplies of food sank dangerously low—I couldn't even find a carrot to munch for dinner—so I confronted Sherry when she got home that night.

"With my schedule I just don't have the time to shop anymore, Ian. . . ."

Her tone was matter-of-fact. As usual these days, she headed straight for the bedroom.

"Oh," I grunted stupidly. I flopped onto the sofa, stared at the Lakers game, and thought it over. She was overwhelmed at work, that had to be the explanation, of course—she'd arrived home late every single evening for the past two weeks. Then it occurred to me that she was either being fed at the office, which was usually the case when employees were on a project that ran into the evening hours, or she was going out to dinner on her own or with people from her department. She never once in the past two weeks alluded to the food supply—*Was there enough food for me? Was I eating at all?* She just didn't give a damn. The obvious conclusion—the *only* conclusion I could draw—was that she was punishing me for my one-afternoon stand.

I decided not to make an issue of it. Why? Because I was *guilty.* Let it slide, I figured . . . Sherry will get over it and things will revert to normal.

I gave in, went out, and did the shopping. I even bought a bunch of irises and placed them in a vase on the kitchen table where Sherry couldn't help but notice them. They were supposed to be an olive branch, but she didn't make much of a fuss except for remarking that they must have been expensive. . . .

Aside from that little glitch our relations were pretty much what they'd been—what they'd become over the years. We talked when she was around, we slept in the same bed, we even made love now and then. And if she was still bothered by that phone call, she got over it. She was the old Sherry. We were still in it together.

But a month later another incident occurred, an incident much more disturbing. I happened to be searching the cluttered stacks of books in my work room for a volume when I noticed something

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peculiar. My prize collection of Highsmiths—signed first editions of *Strangers on a Train, The Blunderer, The Talented Mr. Ripley,* and a few others—was missing from its place. Missing in its entirety. The set was already worth thousands, and if you kept tabs on the Internet, it was appreciating by the day—it was the single most valuable possession I owned. Since I would never even dream of lending any one of those particular novels out—I'd scoured rare and used bookstores all over the West with Sherry to find them—there was no rational explanation for their disappearance.

How long had they been gone? I scanned the shelves again. And again. I checked under the couch, in the living room, in all the closets. Then I raked over every square inch of the bedroom; same with the kitchen. Nothing. Zero. The books were gone. It simply didn't make sense.

For the rest of the day I couldn't do a lick of work on the screenplay. My ability to concentrate was completely shattered. I phoned Sherry at work, but only succeeded in talking to her voice mail. I asked her to call me, but she didn't, which was out of the ordinary.

When she finally showed up late that night, I put the question to her as coolly as possible: Did she have any clue what happened to my collector's items?

She sat on the sofa and gazed listlessly at the TV screen, where the late news was buzzing. Without looking at me, she said, "I wouldn't have the foggiest idea, Ian. . . ."

That was it. She didn't show the least trace of surprise, dismay, anger. Strangely, she didn't even speculate herself on where the books might have gotten to.

"Sherry—did you happen to pick up those books yourself in the past few weeks?"

She shook her head. "No, Ian, I didn't. I never did like that woman's style very much, you know that. Why would I pick them up?"

Weird. . . . And what was more bewildering was that nothing I said would put Sherry on the defensive. She didn't flinch when I interrogated her, didn't chafe at my unjustly accusing *her.* I was totally nonplussed by her peculiar, vapid reaction. On the other hand, I had to admit it was in character for her—which confounded me even more. . . .

Hands on hips, I blocked her view of the screen.

"So you figure someone must have broken in here when we weren't home—or the books, all seven of them, vanished into thin air?"

Sherry merely shrugged at the suggestion.

"Well, that's absurd, Sherry. Completely absurd. Think about it. First of all, there's no evidence of forced entry. And whoever took

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those books had to know they were my prizes, right? They didn't touch Maugham, or Waldo Salt's screenplays, or Bukowski. How would they know what to take? As for the second possibility, I don't happen to believe in the unexplained."

At that she got up and sauntered off, shaking her head. I was about to add something more, but stopped short of outright charging her with the obvious. Why? Because I knew that at her disposal she would have—that she *had*—a retort that was even more serrated. She would propose that my "little friend" had pinched the books either from under my nose (in other words, when I was dozing after we'd screwed right here in the apartment) or when she knew we weren't at home. And I didn't want to open that can of worms again.

All the wind was sucked out of my sails. In the days to come Sherry never asked me once if I'd located the lost volumes; in fact, she never brought up the subject again.

Of course she'd taken them—hadn't she? Sherry was the only person with a motive—wasn't she? Sure—she was still making me pay for my peccadillo. Refusing to do the food shopping wasn't enough; the gesture had been too feeble, and I'd been able to get around it easily enough. Now she'd taken another step, a more dangerous step, and what was maddening was the fact that she pretended in both cases as if nothing at all had happened. No, it wasn't just maddening—it was *insane.*

In the following days, I examined the theft of those books from every conceivable angle. And I had to conclude that it was just possible that someone else aside from Sherry had gotten to them. My friends in L.A., Les and Brian and Scoots, among others, certainly knew about the collection, they'd been to our place, and some of them, the alkies and druggies like Ferdie and George, might be desperate enough on a given night to somehow burgle them. And, ironically enough, I *had* mentioned them in passing to Blair that afternoon in the canyon. . . .

So could Sherry really have been telling the truth after all?

Well, if she did filch the Highsmiths herself, then she knew where they were, and in that case maybe they'd appear again one day as quickly as they'd vanished. Because she sure as hell knew what they meant to me.

I was just about to contact the police when out of the blue my movie deal fell apart. Rubinstein took the call from a flunkey at the Goldenline Pictures office—at the last minute they'd decided to go with another script for spring production. The bastards didn't even have the class to phone me themselves. It was nothing personal, just a matter of economics, like it always is—a prime-time actress had decided to attach herself to the other film, a sup-

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posedly edgy thriller about the drug trade, and that meant it would automatically be more viable in all markets than my project. Besides, with its hybrid of clichés (as if the edgy-thriller-set-in-the-drug-trade genre hadn't been beaten to death already), they weren't quite sure how to market *By the Throat.* Ominously, there was no mention that my screenplay would be shot afterward—or anytime in the future, for that matter—and I suddenly had the queasy feeling that it was never going to happen. After all, there was no guarantee in my contract forcing the company to do something it didn't feel like doing—there never is.

I suppose I should have known better than to get carried away with myself. Even though I still had my up-front money, I was so bummed by the completely unexpected development that I couldn't help but moan to Sherry—after all, it had been she I'd bounced all my ideas off in the gestation, the writing, and the revision periods of any project. If there was ever an unspoken partner in my hackwork, it was Sherry. The hackwork belonged to her in some way, too, though these days we rarely if ever talked about it. I was so dispirited I didn't even notice whether she was reveling in my defeat.

"That's awful, Ian. Someone should teach those people some manners. . . ."

Of course it was awful. It was terrible, a disaster. After all the years I'd grunted and slaved, what I'd managed to build had come apart in one fell swoop, on the whim of a faceless Armani sitting on his duff in an air-conditioned office in Burbank. Despite having some jack in my pocket from the option, I was all the way back at square one. For days on end I couldn't do a solitary thing but stare out the window at the indifferent Pacific, seeing in its vastness nothing but a reflection of the emptiness and disappointment inside me. I even came to loathe the perpetual sun.

I couldn't figure out what to do with myself, which was unlike me. I had no desire to commiserate with or explain the fiasco to my so-called buddies in town—that would only give them the opportunity to laugh up their sleeves at me. For the first time, it was lonely around the apartment without Sherry there—she hardly came home anymore except to sleep—so one evening I ducked out with my calling card to a telephone and rang Blair.

She seemed slightly surprised—even miffed—to hear from me (*Where the hell have you been all this time? You screw me and then call three months later?* were the unspoken questions dangling on the line between us) but I needed someone to confide in. After Sherry, she was the logical choice. But when she heard that my Goldenline deal was history, she seemed to lose interest in me altogether and on the spot.

"Why don't you go and cry on your *wife's* shoulder, Ian?"

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I actually had to laugh. She might as well have come right out and said, *What the hell good are you now?* At that moment, the lyrics of a tune I'd once heard floated through my brain: *"L.A. is an endless one-night stand; when you need a friend, it's a no man's land. . . ."*

The truth is, I'd had a true friend—Sherry—but I'd blown it. Maybe our relations could be repaired, and maybe they couldn't. Either way, the tide had turned against me in a hurry. In the long run, I was just a guy who'd made a single lousy mistake—what guy hasn't at one time or another?—and now I was paying for it. But I didn't have to pay for it forever. Did I?

After being unceremoniously blown off by Miss Topanga Canyon, I forced myself to do the only thing I'd ever known how to do in the bad times: go back to work. So after licking my wounds for a few days I bucked myself up and went at *Sugar Cane* with a relentless energy, nailing the finishing touches into that third draft—then diving in for a fourth and a fifth as well, to make sure all my bases were covered, to be certain the spit was on the shine.

"I'm going to send it over to Rubinstein, maybe tomorrow," I told Sherry that night as we were turning in. I'd finally gotten her to take it to work and read it during her lunch hours, and she'd pronounced it good—even great, which was high praise coming from her. I was hot on the damned thing. I'd been barricaded in the apartment for weeks on end banging on the script, and it was high time to let it see the light of day. Maybe my agent's reaction (he'd cooled on me lately) to its sheer brilliance would compensate for the debacle at Goldenline Pictures. Maybe when it sold they'd be forced to take my first, aborted project out of mothballs and breathe it back to life, as well as every other screenplay of mine that had made the rounds and been rebuffed. Exhausted, I fell into a coma, with Sherry's words ringing in my ears:

"Congratulations, Ian. I have a feeling this is the one that will finally put you over the top. . . ." One thing I'd always trusted was Sherry's hunches, which made me feel even better.

The next morning I woke up late. I'd been burning the candle at both ends and my body needed the rest. Too much caffeine and too much nicotine and too much slamming away at the keyboard had taken their toll. I had my shredded wheat and soy milk, went out for the paper, sipped an espresso at a bookshop on the mall, then headed back to the apartment. Instead of sending it off by snail mail (and Rubinstein, I knew from experience, hated downloading e-mail attachments) I'd decided to jump into the car and hand-deliver *Sugar Cane* to his office in Hollywood. I couldn't wait to hear what he would have to say.

When I went into my office the hard copy of the screenplay wasn't sitting on the desk where I'd left it. I looked around the

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room—*No! Not again!* I turned left. I turned right. *Where was my goddamned screenplay?* It couldn't be—*it just couldn't be. . . .*

The flop sweat was rolling out of my scalp in huge slimy droplets. I tore the place apart in a frenzy. . . . Okay, I reassured myself, the hard copy was gone, *but at least this time I had a backup.* I pulled out my key ring and with trembling thumb and forefinger separated the fireproof safe key from the apartment and car keys. I got down on all fours, crawled under the desk, and fitted it into the latch of the rectangular strongbox where I kept my floppy disks. I rummaged, fumbled, checked through what was there and . . . no *Sugar Cane.* The two disks where I'd stored each successive draft of it were gone. *Someone*—and I had no doubt now who it *had* to be—had known where they were and brazenly ripped them off while I slept.

Excepting a miracle—something due to my own fuzziness, obtuseness, or a simple oversight—I was up the creek. I pounded the floor with my fist. I began to cry like a baby, right there under my desk. I could cobble together another version of *Sugar Cane,* but it would take weeks, months, and it would never have the sizzle of the original. I was finished.

I tried to pull myself together. When I could think half clearly, I went to the telephone and speed-dialed Sherry's number. As usual, she wasn't picking up. I pressed the button again and again and again until finally a secretary answered and demanded to know why I was being such a pest.

"Put . . . Sherry . . . on . . . right . . . now. . . ." was all I could manage to spit out.

"She's not at her desk at the moment. I can leave her a message," cranked the snotty bitch on the other end.

"You do that," I croaked, instructing her to tell Sherry to call home immediately. This was an emergency.

Sherry didn't call. It was around eleven-thirty at night when she finally showed up. I'd been on the sofa waiting for her with a glass of hard liquor, which I hadn't tasted since I was back at Podunk. At that instant it dawned on me that I'd been a complete idiot: *Hadn't she been screwing someone else on all these late nights?*

"Scotch, Ian? I thought that was reserved for guests." She chuckled, but the question was meant to provoke.

"Where is it, Sherry?"

"Where is *what,* Ian?"

"You know *what,* Sherry. I don't have to spell it out."

Stopping in front of me and blinking with those colorless eyes I'd now come to hate, she shook her head of closely cropped hair.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

She turned on her heel and did her beeline for the bedroom. This time I followed.

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"You've ripped the heart out of me, you bitch! So you got your revenge on me for Blair, okay? You got your pound of flesh! Now where the hell is my screenplay? Sherry!"

Placidly, purposefully, with the intent to torment in every little movement, she began to remove her clothes, draping them neatly over their hangers. At that moment I despised even her semi-naked body.

"Sherry—talk! I want you to talk! I'm not fooling around here! Open your mouth!"

She unfastened her brassiere, wriggled out of it, and pulled her nightgown over her head.

"Ian—I'm *being* honest with you. I don't know what happened to your script."

"But you were the only person who knew I'd finished it! You're the one person in the world who knows where I keep my backups! Who else would know where to find my keys? It's you, Sherry, *you,* you—!"

My brain addled from the booze, I couldn't form the invectives I wanted to hurl into her face. She ducked into the bathroom, locked the door, and did whatever it was she did in there before crawling into bed and turning out the light.

I stormed off and got another drink from the liquor cabinet. Later, when I checked the narrow space between the bedroom door and the floor, it was dark. In the front room, that living room that looked out on the ocean and was once upon a time my favorite—*our* favorite—I paced in maniacal circles.

How long did I walk? Even now I couldn't say for sure—it seemed like forever. The yellow moonlight pouring through the windows made my socks look like rats squirming across the carpet. There were rats in my brain, too, gnawing at the gray matter, trying to burrow into my soul.

When they made it through, I turned back into the kitchen and went to the sink, where the dirty dishes from the last several days were stacked willy-nilly. I opened the small door beneath it and from the coffee can where I kept a few tools pulled out the ballpeen hammer I sometimes used for repairs around the apartment. I took a deep breath.

The bedroom was silent. Even the noisy traffic down below on the boulevard had thinned out. The crimson numerals on the bedside clock said 3:08. I listened closely to the world. All I could hear was the faint sound of Sherry's even breathing as she lay dreaming her last dream on the pillow.

Then I raised the hammer over my head and brought it down with all my might.

So you see, sir, that is how it was—we were all doing it: taking revenge on each other. Sherry, my little friend Blair, and, yes, me

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too, of course. I offer no defense for my actions—but let me ask *you* a question for a change. . . . Who was responsible for igniting the deadly chain of events? Me? Or Sherry? Because that answer—who started it—I believe should somehow figure into the equation here. . . .

What happens to me now doesn't matter. Just look—look into my eyes. They're dead at the core, even I can see that. Dead eyes tell only the truth . . . the truth inside the mystery of how I got here.

Here's what I think: Life is one long chain of vengefulness, sometimes subtle, sometimes not. It sounds crazy, but it isn't. You watch—the state of California is going to take its revenge on me. . . .

As for the fact that my collector's items and screenplay were in Blair's possession, I don't know what to say. That's another mystery altogether. ●

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The Bride

by Heather F. Marks

Marjorie loved to get married,
The groom, the parties, the gifts.
But usually once they were settled,
The marriage dissolved into rifts.

So she went from one man to another,
But to keep her finances on course,
She found she preferred to be widowed
Than to pay for a nasty divorce.

To keep from appearing suspicious,
She would move from place to place.
And each of her new wedding portraits
Showed a beaming, angelic face.

But one day fate caught up with her.
Her groom was a similar kind.
Before she could slip him some poison,
He managed to cut her brake line!

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ANYTHING FOR OLIVIA

by John Morgan Wilson

Mrs. Leland Sanborn lived in one of those big, Spanish-style places on a hilltop in Bel-Air where the bougainvillea was as thick and well trimmed as the beard of a pompous professor, which describes her husband in a nutshell.

She was an extraordinarily beautiful woman, someone they might have called "a knockout" or "drop-dead gorgeous" in the old days. Which is a funny way to describe a lovely lady when you think about it—all that implied violence. Or maybe not so funny, in Mrs. Sanborn's case. She'd wanted her husband dead for a long time, I was pretty sure of that. Now he was missing and I was the cop assigned to the case.

John Morgan Wilson is the Edgar Award-winning author of the Benjamin Justice mysteries. Fans of the sleuth will be happy to know that St. Martin's published a new book in the series, *Blind Justice,* in February. Just prior to his return to the Justice series Mr. Wilson launched a new series with renowned bandleader Peter Duchin. See *Blue Moon* (Berkley Prime Crime). This is Mr. Wilson's first short story. ✝

Her name was Olivia, but when you're married to a guy as wealthy and powerful as Leland Sanborn—a tenured business-school dean with a fat family inheritance—some people tend to forget that you have a name and identity of your own. I'd met the Sanborns up here in Bel-Air a few years ago, back when I was working Burglary. Someone had sidestepped their alarm system and cleaned out Mrs. Sanborn's jewelry drawer for half a million in diamonds and gold. Seeing them together that day—or rather *apart,* with several feet of tension between them—I got the idea they weren't exactly the happy couple. Most of the time he talked as if she wasn't there, using the term *my wife* instead of Olivia, indirectly blaming her for the burglary in a haughty voice that sounded irritated and dismissive. He was a big guy, roughly twenty years her senior, going thick in the middle, and more full of

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himself than the stuffed marlin he displayed above the well-stocked bar in his "men only" billiard room. I remember thinking: *This woman deserves so much better. Give me half a chance with a lady like this and I'd make her feel like someone special, not a rich man's damned trophy.*

Now I was up at the Sanborn place again, standing in a posh living room with more square footage than the entire bungalow I'd been raised in on the east side. It was half-past eleven on a night that was chill and wet. Beyond the big windows, through the rain, the city lights sparkled and winked, from Beverly Hills all the way east to downtown L.A., connected by the blur of taillights that was Sunset Boulevard.

Olivia Sanborn stood across the big room, talking on the phone while she splashed tears on the imported Italian tile at her pretty feet. As I watched her weepy performance, it struck me that she would have made a fine actress. We were alone; the live-in housekeeper was on a long-planned holiday, visiting family in Mexico. When Mrs. Sanborn had called the department earlier that evening, she'd sobbed out a story about her husband going out for a walk the previous afternoon and never coming back. With the housekeeper away and the homes up here so private, there was no other witness of any value. Now, into the phone, Mrs. Sanborn sputtered out a similar story about her husband's troubling disappearance. I used the time to study her exquisite face and body, remembering the powerful effect she'd had on me when I'd first met her several years ago. In all the time since, I'd never stopped thinking about Olivia Sanborn.

She finally hung up, dabbed at her eyes with a hankie, then sauntered in my direction, her shoulder-length golden hair set off by the brilliant blue of her eyes and the shimmering satin sheath that hugged every luscious curve on her body.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting." Her voice was a seductive purr. "I felt I should call Leland's sister, give her a status report."

"Seems the proper thing to do."

She looked up at me carefully. "This whole thing has me very upset."

"That's natural."

She crossed her bare arms, hugging herself. "I don't know how I'm going to get through this."

I wanted to rush to her, hold her, but of course I didn't. I was a cop on a case. There were rules to follow, procedures.

"Take it easy. Let me handle things now."

"You're very reassuring, Sergeant."

I smiled a little. "Maybe you should call me Dave."

Her perfect lips curled slightly. "Is that allowed?"

"I think we can get away with it."

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"All right—Dave. And you can call me Olivia."

I thought: If Leland Sanborn never surfaced again, or if he turned up dead, it wouldn't be so improbable for his wife to fall in love with the detective who'd helped her in her time of need. I wasn't a bad-looking guy. I was closer to her age than her husband, and I'd stayed in shape. Besides, I worshiped the spotless tiles she walked on. Was it such a far-fetched idea—the two of us together down the road?

"It's funny," she said. "You coming up here to investigate that break-in three or four years ago. And here you are again. What a coincidence."

"Not such a coincidence, really. As I recall, you asked for me personally. Let the watch commander know that we were already acquainted from the previous case."

Her smile turned coy. "I thought we'd developed a certain rapport."

"Sure, you could call it that."

"It was lucky you were available—Dave."

"What is it they say about luck? Preparation meets opportunity."

She laughed, throaty and rich, and her damp eyes glowed. I wanted desperately to take her right then, right there, and let the rules be damned.

"You must be tired," I said. "Perhaps we should go over a few things. Then I'll be on my way."

Her eyes were locked on mine. "It's going to be hell being alone tonight."

"Maybe you should call someone, have them come over."

"Is that your best suggestion, Detective?"

I smiled a little, then went over the essentials with her, reminding her to file a formal missing-person report but assuring her I'd stay on the case until it was closed one way or the other. When I felt we'd covered what we needed to I suggested it was time for me to go. Anxiety flashed across her face but she saw me to the door. In the lamplight, she looked more alluring than ever. Before, she'd displayed a certain cool and toughness, giving her beauty a hard edge. Now, she seemed softened by what she was going through, more vulnerable, more human. I ached to kiss her.

Instead, I told her not to worry and drove away.

The rain briefly abated as I cruised down the canyon road, feasting my eyes on the most rarefied and respectable enclave in Los Angeles. Bel-Air was a paradise of palatial homes, lavish gardens, tennis courts, swimming pools, sweeping driveways. Up this way, not one damn siren or horn could be heard, not even a raised voice.

Yeah, I thought, *I could live up here.* Instead of the cheesy apart-

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ment I'd rented down in the flats of Hollywood since my costly divorce. Up here where a cop got invited strictly when big shots like the Sanborns had a problem that needed fixing. It wasn't such a crazy notion, was it? Me and Olivia lodged high in Lotus Land, deeply in lust, with more money than we knew what to do with. Hell, I wouldn't be the first cop who fell for a woman who'd put in a distraught phone call to the P.D. Handled right, it wouldn't look so bad.

I passed through the south gate and swung right onto Sunset Boulevard, heading west, feeling an odd compulsion to visit the seashore on a stormy night. A minute or two later, UCLA was behind me and I was over the freeway, taking the twists and turns along Sunset all the way to the beach. The wind had kicked up and the rain was coming down again and I had the wipers going. One of them was scraping and I made a mental note to have it taken care of at the police garage first thing in the morning, right after they gave the car a good cleaning inside and out. I hung a right onto Pacific Coast Highway, headed north for a minute or two, then made a sharp left toward the ocean at a dark stretch that I figured would be empty on a miserable night like this. It was.

I parked down below the highway behind a small grove of eucalyptus trees. When I was certain I was alone, I opened the trunk and pulled Leland Sanborn's body out by the ankles. The blood had dried above his left ear where I'd slugged him with a piece of lead pipe the night before. I got him slung over one shoulder, crossed the sand, and struggled with the slack body down a rock jetty. The waves were rolling in big and close, the way the tide tables and weather reports had predicted. At the end of the jetty I dumped the body, prodding it with my foot until it was half in the water, wedged against the rocks where it would take a good pounding during the night, losing any trace evidence that might prove incriminating.

A minute later, my headlights swung across the highway, pointing south. I steered with one hand while I called Olivia, suggesting she get a good night's sleep.

I heard her shudder. "So the bastard's finally out of my life."

"Until he washes up," I said, "and the tough questions start." I took her silence for trepidation. "Relax, baby. I work Homicide now. I'll be asking the questions."

Her laugh crackled like dry ice. "Try not to be too hard on me, okay?"

"Just follow the rules. Stick to the plan and we'll be fine."

"About that plan," she said.

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"We've gone over it a hundred times, Liv. We wait a year. After that, it won't matter if people see us together."

"No more clandestine meetings in dark bars out of town." Her voice toughened, yet she sounded oddly happy. "No more trysts in cheap motels under false names."

If she was happy, so was I. I'd do just about anything for Olivia. "No more Leland Sanborn. Just his money, baby."

"Without that annoying prenuptial to worry about."

Now I laughed. "You can hold out for one more year, can't you, sweetheart?"

I slipped into the left turn lane, facing the red light at Sunset Boulevard.

"Actually, Dave, I was thinking it should be longer."

"Longer? But that was the plan, honey. One year, then we're together for real."

"Sometimes plans change."

I heard a strange distance in her voice, cool and calm. Somewhere deep in my guts a knot tightened. "How *much* longer?"

"Forever seems about right."

"Forever? I don't get it."

"Sure you do, Sergeant. When you think about it a little."

"Olivia—"

"Call me when you have a lead on Leland's whereabouts, Sergeant. Otherwise, I'd prefer my privacy. I'm sure you understand."

"Olivia, for God's sake—"

"Be careful driving home, Sergeant. You know what they say about Sunset Boulevard—all those dangerous curves."

The line went dead just as the light turned green. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, whether to drive back to the beach and eat my gun or race up to Bel-Air and use it on Olivia. A horn beeped behind me. I gripped the wheel, made my turn.

Rain slanted across the beams of my headlights, as relentless as a bad memory. I drove home slowly, filling the ashtray with butts, watching the wipers drag monotonously across the windshield like the numbing rhythm of my life. Back to an empty apartment, a cold bed, an alarm clock set for six A.M.

Back up Sunset Boulevard, through all the twists and turns. ●

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A Canadian Catastrophe

by Naomi

Tommy wished that he were rich,
Of loonies he would dream,
When all at once he hit upon
A money-making scheme.

Tommy dug a wishing well,
Tommy wasn't dumb;
He knew that loonies added up
Into a tidy sum.

To make a wish and toss a coin,
People came from miles around;
Tommy listened to the splash,
It made a lovely sound.

All summer long 'neath rain and sun
The loonies landed one by one;
All summer long the loonies fell
Down to the bottom of the well.

To share the wealth with those in need,
Well, Tommy didn't give a damn;
The trusting soul who tossed a coin
Was victim of an age-old scam.

September came, the well ran dry,
The loonies lay there in a heap;
"Tomorrow I will count the take,"
Smiled Tommy as he fell asleep.

That night as Tommy lay in bed
THUNDER rumbled overhead,
When suddenly there was a flash
As lightning melted all that cash.

Poor Tommy stood there in the rain
Bewildered by his terrible loss;
As all his dreams went down the drain,
RETRIBUTION won the toss.

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Art by Daniel Galanaugh

A Gathering at Lake St. Catherine

by O'Neil De Noux

When he reached the top of the levee, Detective John Raven Beau put on his extra-dark Ray-Ban sunglasses and surveyed the scene—a burned-out camp next to the brown water of Lake St. Catherine, brown pelicans gliding in line over this saltwater, south Louisiana lake at the eastern edge of Orleans Parish, which made the levee he stood on within the city limits of New Orleans.

Behind Beau, his unmarked police car sat parked along the shoulder of Highway 90, next to the appropriate mile marker, his blue suit coat folded across the front seat. Beau shoved his portable police radio into the back pocket of his pants and loosened his light-blue tie on his way down the levee, toward the camp where the victim's daughter said she'd meet him. With no other car parked on Highway 90, Beau figured she was late. She was too

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anxious on the phone to be a no-show.

It was hotter closer to the water, but Beau expected that. Perspiration began working its way down his temples, dampening his freshly cut dark brown hair. The steamy air, washed in by a lake breeze, smelled of salt and was laced with the scent of burned wood. The camp, suspended on creosote pilings at the water's edge, was still waterlogged from the fireboat water used to put out the fire.

Beau heard a voice and instinctively moved his hand to his stainless-steel 9mm Beretta in its canvas holster on his right hip. He spotted her a moment later, behind the camp, next to the water. Standing on what was left of a boat dock, she was feeding popcorn to ducks, mallards mostly, green-headed males and brown females.

He pulled his hand away from his weapon and took off his sunglasses.

She wore a sleeveless green blouse and tan slacks, her black hair cropped short. She turned as he approached and stood staring with wide brown eyes. She was tall, only a few inches shorter than Beau's six-two. He tried not to react to her beauty, to her classic African features, silky-chocolate skin and thick, sensuous lips painted a deep red.

"I'm Detective Beau."

"Catherine Oubre," she said as she reached out her right hand, which Beau shook. She held his hand an extra moment, her dark eyes staring into Beau's light brown eyes.

"You're only part Cajun, aren't you?" she said. "Like me."

Beau nodded. "My mother's Oglala Sioux."

"My mother was African-American." A slight smile came to her lips. "Don't know which tribe."

She let go of his hand and nodded to the camp. "My daddy lived here fifty-one years. I lived here for twenty." She couldn't be much older than that.

Beau, who'd just turned twenty-nine, put his glasses back on and looked at the burned hulk where they'd found the charred body of sixty-eight-year-old Eldrich Oubre two days earlier. When the autopsy revealed a .22-caliber pellet in Oubre's cranium, Homicide

A new case this month for police detective John Raven Beau, protagonist of the earlier *EQMM* stories "Murder Most Sweet" and "Love and Murder." Beau is reminded of his roots in this tale of subsistence living in a Louisiana backwater. Beau's creator, Mr. De Noux, is himself a Louisiana native. He has served as editor of *New Orleans Stories* magazine and has a number of published novels to his credit. †

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was called in and Beau assigned the case.

"It was arson," Beau said. "Arson investigators found accelerant residue. Gasoline."

She nodded. "I spoke with them this morning. They said you were in charge of the case now."

Beau nodded. Homicide outranked arson.

Catherine turned toward the lake and folded her arms. "For the last two years the oil people have been trying to push my daddy off his land." She pointed to a large cypress tree next to the burned camp. "My daddy planted that tree forty years ago."

Shielding her eyes with a hand, she looked at Beau and continued. "My parents claimed this land under Louisiana's adverse possession law. Ever hear of that law?"

Beau nodded again. "If someone lives continually and publicly on land for thirty years, they own the land. Irregardless of who has title to it."

Catherine seemed surprised that he knew that particular law, which wasn't part of the criminal code.

"Two years ago, right after my mom died, my daddy got an eviction notice from Pelikan Oil Company. We've been fighting them ever since." Catherine stepped back up on the dock. "My daddy killed a twelve-foot gator under here once. It was eating his ducks." She spread her arms. "These are my daddy's ducks."

Catherine Oubre spent the next five minutes explaining how she was an only child, like Beau, and how her father lived off the land, as Beau's father had. Eldrich Oubre fished and hunted rabbits, squirrels, and nutria, and caught little green turtles.

"We got fifteen cents apiece for the turtles. We raised vegetables and grew those orange trees." Catherine pointed to a stand of small trees lining the bottom of the levee.

Leaning back against the dock, she went on to explain how they collected Spanish moss used for stuffing car seats and mattresses and life preservers at a penny-and-a-half a pound.

She focused those dark brown eyes at Beau and said, "We were poor. Dirt poor, as the saying goes. Have you ever been poor, Detective Beau?"

Beau felt a lump in his throat as memories of his childhood flashed in his mind, of fishing the dark brown water of Vermilion Bay with his father, hunting coons and nutria and swamp rabbits in the deep swamp of Southwestern Louisiana, of living in the old Cajun daubed house his grandfather built by hand, its walls packed with swamp mud to keep out the weather, of going hungry some nights and feasting when the hunting was good. Beau could almost see his father's craggy face smiling at him, like the time Beau landed a fat, twelve-pound yellow catfish on Bayou Brunet.

"Was that a nod?" Catherine asked.

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"Yep." Beau took in a deep breath. "I grew up poor, on water just like this. Vermilion Bay. Didn't even know I was poor till I went to school. The other kids let me know right away."

"Me, too." Her voice was a whisper.

Beau walked up the partially burned steps of the camp, stopping before reaching the top, and looked at the charred remains of a sofa, refrigerator, table, chairs.

"You going all the way in?" Catherine called out from below.

Beau shook his head. "I've seen the crime-scene photos." He came back down, noting the scorched generator next to the camp. He pulled the small notepad from his rear pocket and clicked his ballpoint pen. "Anyone else live around here?"

Catherine pointed down the levee to a distant camp. "That's Mr. Jeansonne's. Like everyone around here, he fishes and hunts. He was my daddy's friend." Turning around, Catherine pointed in the opposite direction. "Mr. Nunez lives about a mile that way. He has a shrimp boat."

"Know anyone who'd want to hurt your father?" Some obvious questions had to be asked.

"Only the oil company."

"Anyone in particular there?"

"A Mr. Regent sent some threatening letters. Threatening to physically remove Daddy from his land."

When Beau asked where the letters were, Catherine nodded to the burned camp.

"Did your father own a twenty-two?"

Catherine shook her head. "He had a four-ten shotgun."

Beau remembered seeing what was left of the shotgun in one of the pictures of the burned camp. Beau slipped his pad and pen away.

"Let's go see this Jeansonne."

They walked on the grass at the base of the levee, the sun hot on their heads, the scents of lake mud and saltwater thick in the humid air, scents more familiar to Beau than the magnolias and roses of New Orleans's Garden District.

The only sound was the squawks from a small flock of seagulls diving to the water and rising again. Sandpipers raced along the tiny sand beach at the water's edge, stopping to pluck the occasional insect.

Jeansonne's camp was also on pilings, a screen porch surrounding the unpainted wooden structure. The screen was patched in places, giving it the look of an old quilt. There was an aluminum flat-bottom boat moored against the tiny dock.

"Monsieur Jeansonne!" Catherine called out.

"Come on up dere," a voice with a thick Cajun accent called back.

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Beau led the way up to the porch, where a dark-complected man with long salt-and-pepper hair sat on an old wooden rocking chair. He wore a gray T-shirt and baggy jeans and smoked a pipe. He was barefoot.

Catherine introduced them and Beau saw the man glance at his gold star-and-crescent badge clipped to the front of his belt. Jeansonne asked them to sit and pointed to the wooden folding chairs beside him.

"It was a shock," Jeansonne said. "Me and Eldrich been here so long, I don' know wha' to do."

"Were you here when it happened?"

Jeansonne pointed to the lake. "I fished all night. Lef' to fish before de sun set and come home in de middle of de dey. De fireboat was still dere with de hoses and de water and Eldrich place was . . . smokin'."

"Did you see Eldrich before you left that day?"

"Mais no."

"Did you see anyone around his place?"

"Mais no. De last time I seen Eldrich was de day before dat. He was on his dock and I go wif' my boat and we wave. He was feedin' de duck."

"Did you see any boats in the area that day?"

"Jus' de Pelikan Oil crew boat. Dey sniff around for de oil, I guess."

Beau asked if Jeansonne had any trouble with Pelikan Oil. Jeansonne said he hadn't; since he'd only lived there ten years he had to leave. Apparently his camp had been abandoned by the previous occupant and Jeansonne didn't own it or build it, like Eldrich Oubre.

"Did you get any letters from Pelikan?"

"Jus' one. It say I gotta go. I trew it away. Dey come get me off one day and I guess I go."

Jeansonne had known Eldrich Oubre for ten years, but they weren't close. Not talking for months at a time. "We all keep to ourself down here."

Beau asked about Nunez and Jeansonne huffed, claiming he had little to do with Nunez. Nobody did. "Nunez is what you call a hermit. He don' like nobody."

"Do you own a twenty-two?"

"Mais no. Got a twenty-gauge shotgun. Eldrich got a shotgun, too."

"Nunez have a gun?"

"Me, I don' know."

After getting the man's full name, date of birth, and social security number—Jeansonne had to dig a dog-eared card from his cigar box of papers—Beau left his card in case the man thought of

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anything else.

"I got no phone," Jeansonne said.

Beau pulled two quarters and two dimes from his pocket and smiled slyly as he suggested the old man find a pay phone.

"I know dey got dem tings." Jeansonne was ribbing him now. "I seen dem."

Beau and Catherine crossed the levee and took his car to the next milepost. Nunez lived in a slightly larger camp, also suspended on creosote pilings. No one was home and no boat around, either. Catherine seemed relieved.

"You got Mr. Jeansonne's name and all to check him through the police computer, didn't you?" she said.

"You never know. He could be a mass murderer."

On their way back to the car, Beau asked, "How'd you get out here today?"

"I took the bus."

"Come on. I'll drive you back in." Beau lead the way up the grassy levee. "How about some lunch?"

"I'm not hungry."

At the top of the levee, Beau turned and looked into those dark brown eyes. "You have anything else to do? Have lunch with me."

Catherine nodded and slowly turned to look back at the lake, shielding her eyes once again with both hands. She took in a deep breath, then followed Beau down the levee to his police car.

"I have an ulterior motive," he said as he opened the front passenger door of his black Chevy Caprice. Catherine's eyes narrowed. He smiled. "You've got to know a good place to eat around here."

She did. Tauzin's Eat-N-Gas had been a busy truck stop along Highway 90 before Interstate 10 was built. It still served some of the best seafood, and sold gasoline to locals, but the big rigs were gone. Beau and Catherine had soft-shell crabs and drank Barq's, "the root beer with bite," rather than a cold beer, which Beau would have preferred if he didn't have a lot of work to do on this case.

Not wanting to disturb her meal, Beau waited until they drove away to ask about Nunez. She shrugged and said he wasn't a very nice man. She saw him kill a stray dog once and thought he probably ate it.

"He's a real hermit," she concluded. Her father had no problem with Nunez, however. Eldrich got along with everyone.

Beau didn't say it. At least one person didn't get along with Eldrich.

Catherine Oubre lived in a student dorm at the University of New Orleans, which she attended on full academic scholarship. Beau managed to learn that she was majoring in marine biology and

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worked part-time at The Copy Center on Leon Simon Boulevard.

As Beau turned into the university campus, he saw tears welling in Catherine's eyes. He parked, walked around, and opened her door for her. She climbed out and he asked if she was going to be all right.

She nodded, not looking at him at all, and said, "I wanted my daddy to see me graduate more than anything."

Closing the door, Beau watched her move away and knew that no matter how long it took, he'd catch Eldrich Oubre's killer.

"That's a fact, Jack," he said aloud to himself.

He could still smell her light perfume in the car when he climbed back in, like a reminder. Like a reminder.

Before going to Mr. Regent's office, Beau did a little background check and learned the man was Jefferson D. Regent IV, with an exclusive uptown residence on Audubon Boulevard. A graduate of Tulane Law School, Regent had been admitted to the bar before becoming an oil company executive.

Two hours after dropping Catherine Oubre at her dorm, Beau walked into the outer office of Pelikan's Director of Operations on the fortieth floor of the glass-and-chrome Louisiana Energy Center on Poydras Street, just down from the Superdome. The dark green carpet was plush, the beige walls decorated with framed prints of the French Quarter, the air-conditioned atmosphere a brisk seventy degrees, smelling faintly of vanilla; the prissy, forty-ish executive secretary had standard-issue icy-blond hair, blue eyes, and a chilly voice that asked, but didn't mean, "May I help you?"

Beau took his credentials from his coat pocket.

"Detective John Raven Beau. Homicide Division. I'd like to speak with Mr. Regent."

"The police?"

He opened his coat to show his badge, then showed her his weapon.

"I've got handcuffs, too, if you want to see them."

"That's not necessary," the icy voice snapped as she picked up her phone receiver. "I just wanted to confirm you weren't with building security."

"No, I'm the real police."

"Mr. Regent?" Her voice softened. "A police detective would like to speak with you."

She covered her mouthpiece and asked Beau what this was about.

"Murder."

She whispered the word to Mr. Regent, hung up, and asked

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Beau to have a seat, waving to a sofa against the far wall, adding, "It'll be awhile. He's in a meeting."

"I'd rather stand here with you." Beau leaned against her desk. "I'd like to watch you work. Really. What's your name, anyway?"

Her name was Doris and she tried her best to ignore Beau, turning to her computer keyboard.

"What are you typing?" he said after she'd typed one sentence. "Anything important? You're not typing letters to the people living on Lake St. Catherine, are you?"

Doris turned her computer screen away from Beau.

"Do you have your own parking space downstairs?"

Doris glared at him.

"I had to park at a meter."

She exhaled loudly.

"Are you married?"

She stood up and moved around the desk.

"You smell nice."

She knocked softly on the large double doors that obviously hid Mr. Regent, went in, and came out seconds later.

"Mr. Regent will see you now." The voice was super chilly.

"Thanks."

Mr. Regent sat alone behind a black lacquer desk the size of Cincinnati. So much for that meeting. He was on the phone. The walls of his office were all glass, providing a dramatic look at the New Orleans skyline. Balding, Regent looked to be around fifty, with deep-set eyes, a long nose, and a weak chin. If ever a face needed a beard, this was one.

Regent pointed to one of the chairs in front of his desk. Beau picked up one of Regent's business cards from a silver tray on his way around the desk. Regent was Vice-President of Operations for Southeast Louisiana. Beau slipped the card into his coat pocket as he stepped next to Regent and stared down at the uneasy oil exec, who quickly ended his call.

"I indicated for you to sit on the *other* side of my desk."

"I prefer to stand." Beau pulled out his credentials and introduced himself.

"Could you stand on the other side of my desk, please?"

The stuff Beau had learned in that body-language school really worked. Americans liked to keep their space. He pulled his notebook from his pocket as he moved to the other side, giving Regent his desk as a buffer. Without looking up, Beau asked, "Where were you Saturday?"

"Why do you need to know that?"

Beau gave the man an unfriendly smile. "Don't you watch TV?"

"What?"

"It's customary for the detective to establish where everyone

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associated with the victim was at the time of the murder."

"What victim?"

"Eldrich Oubre." Beau watched the deep-set eyes, but Regent hid any reaction. "You know, the man Pelikan has been trying to evict from Lake St. Catherine."

Beau spotted a hint of recognition in Regent's eyes, but the man just shrugged.

"So, Counselor, where were you Saturday?"

Regent pursed his lips, huffed, then explained he was home all day with his wife, cutting grass and gardening.

Beau had a hard time envisioning this guy cutting grass.

That night, Regent and his wife went to a movie.

"Where? Which movie?"

"Since when is my taste in movies the business of the police department?"

Beau waited.

"We saw *The Sound of Music* at the Prytania Theater. It's a retrospective theater. Know what that means, Detective?"

Beau didn't snap at the bait.

"You sent Mr. Oubre several letters. Signed them yourself."

Regent shrugged again.

"We'd like to get copies of those letters."

"You cannot have them," Regent said smugly. "Those are confidential company documents."

"Then you remember them."

"I'm aware of squatters on our land on Lake St. Catherine. I sent letters to a number of people."

"Well, one of them was murdered and his house burned. So you don't have to worry about him anymore."

Regent leaned back and put his hands behind his head. He was getting confident now.

"Did you ever meet Eldrich Oubre?"

"Hardly." Regent looked at his watch.

"Ever see his camp?"

"No. And this intrusion is becoming quite time-consuming. If you have a point, I wish you'd get to it, Detective."

"A Pelikan crew boat was on the lake around the time of the murder. We'll need the names of the crew."

"That's confidential information. Are they suspects?"

It was Beau's turn to shrug. Then he added in a conciliatory tone, "They might have seen something. We need to talk with them."

"Good luck." Regent stood as if the interview was over. So much for being conciliatory.

Beau shot the man the look of the plains warrior—a penetrating stare with face void of expression. "Luck has nothing to do with it.

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I'll be back."

As he was reaching the door, Regent called out, "Expect a harder time getting past my secretary if you come back."

On Beau's way out, Doris told him, "You're a very rude young man."

Beau stopped, slipped on his Ray-Bans, and grinned. "I know. They teach us that at the Police Academy."

In truth, Beau learned it on the street. Years of dealing with the public.

Since it wasn't four o'clock yet, Beau hustled straight to the D.A.'s office.

Ten A.M. the following day, Beau and his lieutenant walked into Doris's office with a uniformed patrolman. Lieutenant Dennis Merten, two inches shorter than Beau, stood an even six feet but looked much larger. A linebacker build, skin as dark as burned wood, Merten's wide face looked harsh, even when he smiled, which was as rare as a cool day in summer.

"Wait," Doris called out as Beau and Merten walked past her desk. "You can't go in there."

Beau smiled at the patrolman, who stopped next to Doris's desk.

"I'm calling Security!" Doris snatched up her receiver.

Beau waved back at the patrolman. "Told you she was dangerous."

Regent was behind his desk again, the two chairs in front of his desk occupied by Japanese businessmen. Regent's mouth fell open. A sneer quickly followed.

"How dare you!"

Beau stopped next to the Japanese businessmen, bowed slightly, and said, "We're very sorry to interrupt y'all." He moved around the desk, pulling the subpoenas from an interior pocket of his tan sports jacket. Regent pushed his chair back and turned to face him.

Beau continued addressing the Japanese businessmen. "We're just the police with a subpoena for Mr. Regent here. He hasn't been very cooperative with us on a murder investigation, so we're subpoenaing him and his records to the Grand Jury."

Beau dropped the subpoenas in Regent's lap. "That's a Grand Jury subpoena and a subpoena duces tecum for those letters you wrote to Mr. Oubre, the names and addresses of all crews who've worked Lake St. Catherine over the last five years, especially the crew boats and all on board during the two weeks surrounding the murder, and your appointment books and diaries." Beau pointed an index finger at Regent. "See ya Friday, Counselor."

On his way back around the huge desk, he pointed to Merten, who stood towering over Regent's visitors with a sneer on his face.

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"This is my commanding officer, Lieutenant Merten. If you want to complain about me, this is your man."

Merten waited, but Regent said nothing, so he volunteered, "Detective Beau's a little pushy sometimes, isn't he?"

"He's worse than that! He's the rudest man—"

"I hear that a lot. But he's effective." Merten reached over and patted one of the startled Japanese on the shoulder. "Are *your* police officers very polite?"

The man shook his head, which brought a near-grin to Merten's face. Backing away, Merten pointed his chin toward Regent. "Next time a detective asks for your help, you might want to cooperate."

Beau led the way out. Two beefy-looking security men in maroon sport coats stood against the wall, the patrolman facing them with his arms folded. Beau stopped at Doris's desk, leaned both hands on top, and started laughing.

"Got 'em cornered, doesn't he?"

Beau found two boys fishing from Eldrich Oubre's dock that afternoon. Both were shirtless, their brown skin shiny with perspiration. The younger boy was about seven, the other barely a teenager. Their eyes widened as Beau stepped up in his shirtsleeves, badge clipped to his belt, Beretta in its canvas holster on his hip.

His smile did little to alleviate their apprehension, so Beau put his hands behind his back and asked, "Catch anything?"

The little one pointed to a green bucket. Beau looked inside and saw two perch and a nice-sized largemouth bass, about three pounds.

"Very good." He stuck his hand out to the little one and said, "I'm John."

The boy shook his hand, but pulled his own back quickly to grip his cane pole with both hands. The older boy stood and extended his hand and said he was Jeffrey. The little guy was his brother Billy.

Jeffrey carefully watched his cork as he told Beau that they lived on the other side of the levee, down the road a ways, how Mr. Oubre always let them fish from his dock when the ducks weren't around, and how sad they were about the old man.

Jeffrey's cork bobbled but went still. Beau asked his questions quietly.

The day Oubre died, Jeffrey didn't come by the camp but saw three boats on the lake: Mr. Nunez's shrimp boat, a tugboat, and Pelikan's crew boat, which was the only one that came close to shore. Jeffrey said Jeansonne was nice and Eldrich Oubre was a very nice man. He steered clear of Nunez. The man ran them off once, for fishing too close to his crab traps.

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"Seen any strangers around here lately?"

"Nope."

"What about hitchhikers on Highway 90?"

"Sometimes. Not lately."

Putting his sunglasses on, Beau looked toward Nunez's camp. "So Nunez is mean, huh?"

"He yell at everybody. Even yell at Mr. Oubre 'cause Mr. Oubre don't want nobody putting crab traps around his dock 'cause of the ducks." Jeffrey got another nibble. When his cork stopped moving, he checked his bait and the shrimp was still there.

"You say Jeansonne's a nice man. Ever see him get mad?"

Jeffrey shook his head.

As Beau started to leave, Jeffrey landed a large sailfin catfish, about a five-pounder.

"That's good eating," Beau said.

"You got that right." Jeffrey smiled broadly as he carefully worked the hook from the big cat's mouth.

Beau checked Jeansonne's camp and found no one there and the aluminum boat gone, so he headed in the other direction.

Nunez's shrimp boat was a jury-rigged contraption that looked as if someone had nailed a couple of boats together, and the shrimp nets, small and all patched up, looked as if they had leprosy. His dock was in worse shape, just some rickety boards nailed together at water level.

Nunez wasn't in much better shape, a sunburned man with cotton-candy white hair and a scowling face with deep lines. He could have been younger than his sixties, but looked every bit as old as that. Nunez was using a carving knife to skin the first of two nutria hanging from an old clothesline behind his camp. A squirrel also hung from the line.

He waited until Beau was close before telling him to get off his land.

Beau tapped down his Ray-Bans and waited for Nunez to look at him again before saying, "This isn't your land. It belongs to Pelikan Oil, doesn't it?"

Nunez looked at Beau's badge and said, "What you want with me?"

The old man pulled the guts from the nutria and dropped them in the bucket beneath the large rodent. Nutria were fair game for anyone, nowadays. Not an indigenous animal, the damn South American rodents were illegally introduced to the swamplands of South Louisiana long ago. Their only natural enemy were alligators, but the nutria were too prolific to be slowed in their infestation. Cajuns ate 'em. Beau had nutria gumbo often and his father cured the pelts. Even the anti-fur people didn't complain when they started making nutria fur coats. The big, orange-toothed rodents weren't cute like mink and chinchillas.

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"If you here 'bout Oubre," Nunez said, "oil company killed him and burned his camp."

Beau pulled out his pad and pen. "Did you see it happen?"

"Don't have to." Nunez dug a small bullet from the nutria and dropped it in the bucket. "They got crew boats on the lake all the time. They think they own the land, just like Oubre thought he did."

Nunez said he wasn't around at the time of the killing. Like Jeansonne, he was out on the lake. He saw nothing, didn't even see the fire, just some smoke. When Beau asked how many letters Nunez received from Pelikan, Nunez said, "Letters?"

The old man became angry when Beau asked for his complete name, date of birth, and social security number. He said he had no social security number, but provided the other information before waving Beau away. He was a busy man, after all.

On his way over the levee, Beau realized there were no mailboxes along the highway. No way a postman would climb over the levee to deliver mail. Back at the office, he called Catherine and learned Pelikan delivered its letters by crew boat.

He ran the names through the police computer—Eldrich Oubre, Jacques Jeansonne, Alfonso Nunez, Jefferson D. Regent IV, even Catherine Oubre. No hits, not even a traffic ticket, except for Jacques Jeansonne. Twenty-seven years earlier he'd been convicted of manslaughter, a barroom brawl, and spent ten years in Angola State Penitentiary.

Beau called a buddy at NOPD's Seventh District, which patrolled Highway 90 all the way to the Rigolets, and checked suspicious-person reports and abandoned-car reports. Only two hitchhikers were stopped in the last week, a young couple from Pennsylvania. They were searched and let go. No guns, no twenty-two. Beau checked with the state police after that and came up with another big zero. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries hadn't had any reports in the area. He didn't tell them about Nunez hunting within city limits.

Closing his eyes, Beau could see himself back in the swampland, see himself creeping around a cypress tree, getting a bead on a raccoon, and shooting it with his treasured Winchester twenty-two long rifle. Subsistence living. People in the city had no idea what it was like, living off what you could kill.

Beau spent Thursday in court on an inner-city murder case from last year. A citizen named Skip Johnson had gone into Eddie's Good Luck Bar and shot one of his running padnas, Joe Bailey, three times and Bailey's girlfriend, Linda Grace, three times. Grace survived, but was paralyzed. Bailey didn't make it.

It took Beau three months to come up with Johnson's name from the midnight bartender at Eddie's Good Luck Bar, only the bartender wouldn't testify to *anything*. It took Beau another month to

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get Linda Grace to confirm the story, only she also refused to testify against Johnson. They were all afraid of ole Skip. So Beau searched through armed robberies in Gert Town, where Johnson operated, and got ole Skip identified as the man who carjacked an elderly couple six months back. A search warrant of Johnson's house turned up the gun used to kill Bailey and paralyze Linda Grace. The gun had Johnson's fingerprints on it.

Later the evening of the search, Beau showed Grace and the reluctant bartender his obsidian hunting knife, describing how he planned to scalp Johnson, now he was a wanted man. The next day Johnson turned himself in at the parish prison.

Once Skip Johnson was in jail, everyone decided to testify, especially after Beau assured them that if they didn't, Johnson would be back on the street hunting them down, since Beau would tell Johnson who'd fingered him. Surprisingly, two additional eyewitnesses from the bar surfaced, all lining up to say, yes, Skip Johnson shot the two. He sure did. And the terror of Gert Town was brought down.

When Johnson's lawyer got to cross-examine Beau at the trial, he accused the tall detective of threatening to scalp his client.

"Didn't you threaten him with a Sioux scalping knife?"

Beau answered calmly. "It's an obsidian hunting knife and I never threatened Mr. Johnson. In fact, Counselor, I never met him until this morning in court. You might recall that when he turned himself in at the parish prison you ordered him not to talk with police and notified the detective bureau of your order."

Beau had to wait in the hall as the line of eyewitnesses trailed into the court to hammer Skip "The Terror" Johnson to the wall. In Louisiana, witnesses were sequestered. They couldn't hear other witnesses' testimony and couldn't leave the courthouse.

Sitting in the hall, Beau spotted Matt LeBlond, a Police Association attorney, and waved him over. Short, heavyset, and balding, LeBlond looked more like an elf than a hard-nosed lawyer.

"What's up?" LeBlond's cheery personality was disarming, but he was one tough bastard when pushed into a legal corner. Beau took ten minutes of his time to lay out Catherine Oubre's potential civil case against Pelikan Oil.

LeBlond said he knew all about Louisiana's adverse possession law, his tiny eyes eager with anticipation.

"She has no money," Beau assured him.

"Yeah, but I get to sue Pelikan." LeBlond pulled out a stack of business cards and passed one to Beau to give to Catherine. "They'll probably settle and she'll get something." LeBlond started backing away, looking at his watch. "Have her call me."

"Thanks," Beau called out.

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Friday morning found Beau back in the criminal courts building, outside the Grand Jury room, with a bespectacled assistant D.A. named Alvin Johnson (no relation to Skip "The Terror") when Jefferson D. Regent IV walked in with his two attorneys carrying two boxes of files and letters.

Alvin Johnson relieved the attorneys of the files and told them to take a seat in the hall. When Regent objected, Johnson grinned at him and said, "Counselor, don't you know you can't bring your lawyers into the Grand Jury room?"

Beau went in and sat next to Johnson as Regent was asked one hundred and sixty-five questions, most concocted by Beau, who busied himself going through the papers from the boxes. The last letter Pelikan sent to Eldrich Oubre was dated three weeks ago. So no crew boat had delivered any letter to Oubre for weeks.

Johnson's high-pitched voice grated on Beau and irritated the hell out of Regent as he asked his questions:

"Where were you on the day of Mr. Oubre's murder? . . . What were you doing? . . . Who from Pelikan Oil was on Lake St. Catherine on the day of the murder?" The questions continued as the A.D.A. got the names of all the crew boatmen on Lake St. Catherine for the last month, especially the ones on the lake the day of the murder.

Regent said he never met Eldrich Oubre and had never been on Lake St. Catherine. He said the reason crew boats were on the lake was to survey their land. Geologists were on most boats. No one carried weapons on Pelikan crew boats.

Those were the pertinent questions. The remaining one hundred plus were to piss Regent off, like when was he born and where, how long had he been a vice president at Pelikan, was he related to anyone else at Pelikan, how many other people had he forced off their land, and did he know a woman named Judith "Bunny" Jones, a prostitute who dealt with high-paying clientele. Regent tried to remain cool as Johnson ran off a litany of other names of prostitutes and drug dealers, asking Johnson if he knew them. He simmered, but didn't loose his cool. Beau was happy just to see him simmer.

The Cove at the University of New Orleans was a mini food court with fast-food outlets and a couple of homemade cookeries. Seated at a rear table, Catherine Oubre wore a white T-shirt and jeans and looked as young as a high-school student. Beau, in his gray suit, was thankful for the brisk air-conditioning. Catherine's eyes looked particularly dark in the dim light.

Over steakburgers, Beau told Catherine what he'd learned from Mr. Regent, which wasn't much, and what he'd learned from the boat crew he'd interviewed the previous evening.

The captain of the boat on the lake on the day her father died

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was a retired New Orleans fireman, friendly as hell, answering Beau's questions without hesitation. The crew had two retired sheriff's deputies. They didn't see Oubre that day, never went within a mile of Oubre's camp. Despite Regent's statement, crew boats usually have weapons on board, twenty-twos mostly. That day the captain brought a shotgun to use on water moccasins. He didn't know if anyone else had a weapon aboard.

"The captain was aware of Pelikan's feud with your father, but never spoke with your father personally. He said your daddy always waved when the crew boat passed and the captain waved back."

Catherine put her burger down and dabbed her mouth with the napkin and just stared at Beau with a sadness in her eyes. "Do you really think you'll catch who did it?"

"Yes," he answered evenly, then took a bite of burger, which was quite good, nice and spicy.

"You sound pretty sure of yourself. You know something you're not telling me?"

Beau looked into her eyes again and said, "I'll solve it because I won't stop until I do. I didn't say I'd solve it quickly."

Catherine picked up her burger and took a bite. "What will you do next?"

"I went through the papers provided by Pelikan and found the letters they sent your father and Jeansonne."

"Find anything interesting?" Catherine picked up a french fry and nibbled at it.

"It's what I didn't find. No letter to Nunez."

"I wonder why."

"That's what I wondered and I went back and checked the description of your father's land. Did you know he claimed three miles of land heading northeast from his camp?"

Catherine shook her head.

"Nunez's camp is on your father's land. And one other thing," he said. "Jeansonne served ten years in Angola for manslaughter."

Catherine took in a deep breath and held it for a long while.

Jeansonne wasn't home that afternoon. Beau snooped around and found two wet-cast nets out back. Jeansonne had been there, unless someone else hung up his nets. So he headed for Nunez's.

As he crested the levee behind Nunez's camp, he spotted the old man walking away from his clothesline where three fresh nutria hung. Nunez carried an orange bucket over to a smaller metal bucket. He reached in and pulled entrails from the orange bucket and dropped them into the metal bucket before tossing the rest of the blood on the grass. The entrails would make good crab bait.

Beau moved down the levee. Nunez saw him, picked up the metal bucket, and headed for his boat. He took off before Beau

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reached his camp. Wiping the perspiration from his forehead, Beau looked back at the nutria and felt a tingling in the soles of his feet.

He felt his heart racing as he stepped over to the slop Nunez had just thrown out. Two shiny bullets lay in the bloody grass. Beau went down on his haunches and picked up the pellets. They were in pretty good shape. He could clearly see the lands and grooves carved into the bullets as they traveled through the barrel of Nunez's gun.

You never know, he told himself as he stood up with the pellets. *Sometimes you have to make your own luck.*

He slipped the pellets into a brown evidence envelope from his trunk, then wiped off his hands with one of the disposable wipes he kept to clean his sunglasses.

Armed with search warrants for Nunez's camp and boat and an arrest warrant, Beau led four uniformed officers across the levee just as the sun began its final descent in the western sky, shimmering orange on the brown water of Lake St. Catherine. Three white egrets flew over the policemen as they reached the camp.

Nunez's boat wasn't there. The door was locked, but a side window was unlocked so Beau climbed in and let the others inside. He spotted Nunez's rifle in a far corner. It was a cheap, single-shot Ivor Johnson twenty-two long rifle, Li'l Champ model.

Beau greeted an angry Nunez with a cold smile when the old man stormed up the stairs of his camp an hour later, the same smile that had crossed Beau's face when the firearms examiner told him, yes, the bullets he'd brought in came from the same gun that killed Eldrich Oubre.

"What the hell is all this?" Nunez shouted.

Beau grabbed the old man by the shoulder, spun him around, patted him down, and cuffed his hands behind his back before Nunez could get another angry sentence out.

"What the hell's going on?" Nunez yelled again.

Beau pulled his Miranda Rights card from his credentials pouch and read Nunez his rights, then told him he was under arrest for the murder of Eldrich Oubre. Nunez stiffened and looked away from Beau and never said another word until they were in the interview room at the detective bureau.

"Who saw me?" Nunez asked as Beau turned on the video camera to get his statement on tape. He asked the same question again as soon as Beau finished reading him his rights again.

"Who do you think saw you?"

"Those damn kids. They keep ruining my crab traps, trying to fish. Got the whole goddamn lake to fish and they come by me."

"Did you see them before or after you killed Mr. Oubre?"

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"I didn't see them." Nunez's voice lowered. "But they always snoopin' around."

For the next two hours Beau had to do an unpleasant thing. He had to be nice to a killer, had to be actually friendly. The jury would see how friendly and know Nunez wasn't forced to confess. It wasn't easy for Beau at first, but he began to see something of his father in the old man, although his father never lived to be that old. Cigarettes cut short Calixte Beau's life.

Maybe it was the way Nunez tilted his head when he spoke, or the way he brushed his fingers up and down the inside of his arm, from wrist to elbow joint. Beau found his questions, although just as pointed, didn't sound as tough. His voice didn't have that edge, although he kept his face expressionless, like a good plains warrior.

He focused on something Nunez said at their first meeting, something about how Pelikan thought they owned the land, *just like Oubre thought he did.* Nunez became agitated; Oubre's claim on his land pissed him off.

When pressed, Nunez said he couldn't explain how it happened. It just did.

"He was out on his dock, feeding his damn ducks, when I pulled up in my boat and he yelled at me, then walked away, told me to go away. I followed him. Shot him through the screen door when he turned around. Then I burned the place."

The old man's face was flushed. "I don't know why I did it. I just lost it, went crazy when he walked away like that."

Beau went over it again, in more detail, so the jury wouldn't miss anything. His voice lost its gentleness when Nunez said Eldrich Oubre caused his own death, not letting Nunez set his crab traps near his camp.

Stepping back into the detective bureau squad room, Beau found a note from the D.A.'s office taped to his desk. Skip Johnson, "The Terror," was convicted of second-degree murder. It was the best the state could hope for—a life sentence with no parole, probation, or commutation of sentence. Unless he escaped or got a presidential pardon, Skip Johnson's days of terrorizing Gert Town were over.

A snowy egret stood on one leg at the edge of Lake St. Catherine, just down from Eldrich Oubre's burned camp. Studying the water so intently, it didn't notice Beau walk past. It was too used to humans.

Not a good idea, Beau thought.

Catherine was standing on her father's dock with a bag of popcorn. She dropped popcorn in a slow circle for the mallards and a couple of white ducks. The strong afternoon sun went right through her loose-fitting white cotton dress, and for a moment Beau could see the outline of her body through the cloth.

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She turned to him and he took off his sunglasses and had to squint now. Catherine smiled sadly and sucked in a deep breath.

"You really did it," she said as he stepped up.

Beau put his sunglasses back on.

"How did you figure it out?"

"By not trying to figure it out," he said.

Her brow furrowed, so he went on. "TV detectives look around for suspects and go after them. We don't. We just keep gathering data, gathering evidence until it brings up the killer. All I did was gather."

Catherine still stared at him, so Beau took his glasses off again. It was rarely this easy, Beau was going to tell her, but the word "easy" caught in his throat. There was nothing easy about a father's murder.

"Did he tell you why?"

"I don't think he even knows why. He said he just lost it. He has an anger inside and it built until he snapped."

"That lawyer called me. He thinks I have a good case. Good enough to force Pelikan to settle."

Beau was glad LeBlond had followed right up on it.

Catherine turned the popcorn bag upside down and shook it, scattering popcorn on the murky water, some kernels falling on the ducks. She folded the popcorn bag carefully, then folded her arms.

"Looks like my daddy's gonna leave me enough money to get a good start in life," she said. Catherine bowed her head and took in another deep breath. A moment later a tear fell on the dock.

Beau wanted to put his arms around her, pull her close, but he knew better.

After a minute, Catherine composed herself and said, "Too bad we can't get to know each other better. And you know what I mean. I could see it in your eyes the first time I looked into them."

Beau felt his heartbeat rising.

Catherine wiped the tears from her eyes and looked at him.

"Every time I'd see you, I'd think of this," she said.

He nodded.

"Can I catch a ride back in with you?"

"Sure."

Beau took a step away but stopped as Catherine took another long look out at the still water. Beau closed his eyes and concentrated on the familiar scent of saltwater mud for a moment.

"I can't come back here again," she said, her voice choked with emotion.

Beau understood exactly what she meant as he led her back across to the levee. He had said the same goodbye to Vermilion Bay years ago. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER

by Sandy Balzo

Presumably our neighbor had a first name—one that could be used in polite company—but I had never heard it from my father.

"Bastard Beaumont's out to pave the world. One square inch of asphalt at a time."

Dad was a big believer in green space. He and my mother had built their lannon-stone ranch when it was the only house on a lonely stretch of county road fifteen miles west of the city. That long before their highly antcipated first child, Joan, died in infancy; long before I finally came along, dragging my feet some ten years later; and long before my mother—apparently finding motherhood, once achieved, less than it was cracked up to be—had walked out.

After twenty years as a public relations executive for a major Milwaukee bank, Sandy Balzo formed her own publicity and public relations firm, Balzo Communications. The firm takes on many book publicity projects and has handled public relations for the Bouchercon World Mystery Convention. Ms. Balzo's full schedule has, nevertheless, left her time to start writing her own fiction. This is her first published story; she has recently completed a first novel. ¶

It was also long, *long* before urban sprawl, complete with the offending asphalt driveways and cookie-cutter houses, had turned my father into what he had always abhorred: A suburbanite. With *neighbors*.

"Too bad they didn't all come along a few years earlier," he'd say. "Maybe your mother would have stayed. *She* would have fit right

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in with that bastard Beaumont and his looney wife and dog."

We were looking out the screen door of my father's house at Looney Beaumont, who was talking to her husband. Looney was straddling her pink Schwinn bike—a twenty-incher with a rusty bell and white wicker basket. When she rode, her knees would pump up and down around her ears and her yellow Tweety Bird raincoat, worn every day, rain or shine, would flap in the wind. It was a hot wind today, as it had been for weeks on end.

I glanced over at my father. "Dad, did you start calling her 'Looney' because of the Tweety Bird raincoat?" I'd always suspected my father was more clever than he let on.

"The what?" He didn't look up, too intent on playing peek-a-boo with my son Jack, whom he held. After being thoroughly shaken by the idea of becoming a grandfather when my daughter was born, he had finally warmed up to the idea and now doted over his newest grandchild.

I said, "You know—the Tweety Bird raincoat she wears. Tweety Bird is a Looney Tune cartoon. Like the Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote."

"I call her looney cuz she's nuts. And ain't no one like the Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote, remember that."

I'd gotten the same answer every time I'd asked the question over the years. The Road Runner, like the Three Stooges, had always been sacrosanct in our household.

"Never mind," I said, and watched Looney mount her bike and pedal furiously away. I gave an involuntary shiver: The Wicked Witch of the East meets Holly Hobbie. I said as much to my dad.

"Holly who?" he asked.

"Never mind," I said again.

He eyed me suspiciously. "You ain't giving this big boy no dolls, I hope."

I wondered where a hot-pink teddy bear would fall on my dad's he-man toy list. Teddy was a boy, all right, but if Teddy was PINK, whoaaa. . . .

I changed the subject. "What's Beaumont doing out there?" I pointed toward where the heavyset man was hunkered down at the edge of his driveway with a bucket and what looked like a big putty knife. The Beaumonts' dog, a loopy Irish setter, was sniffing at her master's rear end.

"Told ya. He's out to asphalt the whole goddamn neighborhood. That driveway there? That used to be a full foot narrower."

I stared across the street. "What?"

Dad handed me Jack and moved to the screen door. "Don't be backward. Look-it out there. When the drive was put in, it was right even with his garage, remember? Over the years he's moved a whole foot closer to the Minors' lot line, inch by inch."

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"He's expanding his driveway with a bucket of asphalt and a putty knife?" I couldn't believe it, even of Beaumont. "His drive has to be forty feet long. Why not just bring in a load of asphalt?"

"Damned if I know," grumbled my father, pushing open the screen door. "Cheap bastard is nuts."

Dad let the door slap closed behind him. "'Course if I was married to Looney, I'd probably be nuts, too." My father at his charitable best. He said, "I gotta go move that sprinkler."

I followed him out, carrying Jack. "Dad, you know there's a ban on sprinkling. We're in a drought."

"Hey! Get off my lawn, you mentally deficient chow hound!" Thankfully, he was yelling at the dog, not our neighbor. The setter, having tired of Bastard Beaumont's butt, was now sniffing over on our side of the street.

My father winged a rock at her, missing on purpose, or so I hoped. The setter took off; its master raised his head a half-inch to glare at us and then went back to work.

"It ain't the first drought we've had," Dad continued, "and won't be the last. And they sure as hell can't tell me I can't use my own well water to water my own grass. You want this lawn to look like his?" My father was talking extra loud to make sure Beaumont heard him.

"What's that brown stripe?" I asked, keeping my own voice down. Speculation about the Beaumonts' eccentricities had become one of our favorite topics since they had moved in. And their lawn did look odd: mostly yellow from the lack of rain, but with a brown stripe running directly from the house to the street.

"Drainage tile buried under there," Dad muttered, cranking on the broken spigot to turn off the water so he could move the sprinkler. "It's made of concrete and the roots of the grass on top of it can't go deep enough to suck up water when it's this dry. That part of the lawn dies first, then the rest. I noticed that right off, that's why I make sure I keep ours watered. Beaumont's on city water, though, so he gets to watch his grass die." He chuckled.

"But I thought you couldn't use your old well? That it didn't pass inspection."

Having moved the oscillating sprinkler to precisely where he wanted it in the middle of the lawn, he bent down to turn the water back on. "Stupid idiots. Town didn't care about the 'water quality' when we were *drinking* the stuff. Now that they put in city water and forced me to connect, now that all I use the well water for is watering, *now* they want me to test it every two years. Is that the damnedest thing you ever heard?"

I had to admit I didn't see the logic myself, but I did understand that the water table under the whole county was down, with private wells contributing to that, too.

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As I opened my mouth to explain, a squad car pulled up in front. Beaumont looked up from his work, picked up the bucket and putty knife, and hot-footed it up his driveway. The dog four-footed it right up after him.

The timing wasn't lost on my father. "That looney wife of yours call the cops on me, Beaumont? Huh? Huh?" He was shaking his fist, a lot like Wile E. Coyote, come to think of it, when the Road Runner made his escape. For the record, Beaumont did not *Beep-Beep.* He threw my father the finger.

The police officer walked up the drive toward us, ignoring what passed for a neighborly exchange here. "Sir, I thought we had this all straightened out the last time I was here." She looked from my sullen father to me, apparently hoping I would provide the voice of reason.

I could tell Dad was doing a slow burn, his face turning even redder under the summer sun. I knew from experience that I was not going to be able to sway *him,* so I took the officer aside. "I'm sorry, but my father is set in his ways. He's watered this grass every day of every summer since he's lived here, and that's nearly forty years."

The officer—Schneider, her nametag said—shook her head. "His grass won't die. It will go brown and dormant, like everyone else's. Take a look around."

I did, shifting Jack, who was getting nap-time ornery. Using the vernacular of the crayons and storybooks I now shared space with, my father's acre lot looked like an island of lush Crayola "Forest Green" amidst a sea of "Maize."

"I'm sorry," Schneider said, "but I'm going to have to ticket him again. And if he keeps this up, the town's going to act."

"You're going to arrest him? For sprinkling?" My voice rose against my will and my father turned.

Schneider looked uncomfortable. "They're talking about capping his well."

My father walked over to us. "You *touch* my well, lady, and you'll have me to answer to. Now get your ass off my property and don't come back."

"Dad, you can't talk to a police officer like that."

"Police officer—*hell.*" His face was so red I thought his head was going to blow off like the top of an overheated thermometer in the cartoons he so loved.

"Sir, I don't want to argue." The officer took a step toward him.

My dad was not one to back off. He moved forward instead and shoved Officer Schneider. To her credit, she kept her cool and stepped back, her hand instinctively moving to her belt.

I set Jack down gently and took my father by the shoulder. "Dad, a lawn isn't worth all this."

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"You don't know, you—Hey! You get the hell off my grass!" The Beaumont dog was back on our side, getting ready to pee on Dad's lush lawn. He pulled away from me and started after her, then stopped short and grabbed at his head. "Jesus, my head hurts."

I sat him down on the green grass next to his grandson. Officer Schneider already was calling for the paramedics.

On the way to the hospital, I stopped home to drop off Jack. By the time I got to the emergency room, my father was already in bed and kicking up a fuss. "I'm fine. It was just the heat—maybe a little heat stroke. And that lady cop made me mad. It was all her fault."

He was looking to me for agreement. I sidestepped, not wanting to upset him further. "We need to have you checked out, Dad, and make sure you're okay."

"They're not keeping me here," he said, shaking his left index finger at me.

The little gray-haired nurse who was taking down his information noticed the awkward gesture. "Are you left-handed?" she asked.

"Hell, no—what does that matter?" He thundered at her.

She ignored his rudeness. "Then shake your *right* index finger at us."

"You want to see a finger, I'll show you a finger. Now let me out of here."

The nurse put the chart down on the bed. "Fine. Give me the bird, but do it with your right hand."

Dad's face was bright red again.

"Please," I said, "don't upset him, he—"

She raised one eyebrow at me, and I stopped. "Uh, Dad, *can* you raise your right arm?"

" 'Course I can. Just sure as hell not going to do it for some bitch nurse."

She gave him a look that sent chills down my spine. "Fine," she said, "then let's get a nice big *male* nurse."

"No goddamn man-nurse is going to touch me!" my dad yelled at the top of his lungs, and threw off his covers.

I couldn't believe it, the man had gone off the deep end. "Dad, let them help you."

"The hell I will." With that he slid off the bed and onto the floor.

It was a stroke, the doctors said—the regular kind, not heat stroke. When I finally left that night to go home, I promised my dad two things: That he would go home to his house soon, and that I would keep his lawn watered. I was destined to fail him on both counts.

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By the next morning my father had lost all use of his right arm and leg. The right side of his face was paralyzed, too, and his speech was nearly unintelligible. The doctor explained that there is always swelling in the brain after a stroke. It was too early to tell now just how much damage had been done, and how permanent that damage might be. My dad was a fighter, he said, and fighters did well. As long as they were fighting to get better.

My father would need extensive physical therapy. He would not be going home soon—three to six months, at best. At worst, I didn't want to think about.

There are advantages and disadvantages to being an only child. You never have to share anything, but that goes for burdens as well as rewards. Now I found myself alone, performing an exhausting balancing act between my work, my family, and my dad.

Dad had taken care of me all those years after my mother had left, and I could do no less for him now. I tried to visit him every day in the rehab facility, either on the way to or from work. I wondered sometimes why I bothered, though. My father was getting more and more irascible every day, though I told myself it was the depression that the doctors said often follows a stroke. Having realized that he would not be going home anytime soon, Dad had all but given up on both physical and speech therapy.

I thought his mind was still okay, but it was hard to tell since he couldn't write or speak clearly. In fact, the few words I could understand were his telling me to go water his "goddamn lawn." The "goddamn" part I could make out very clearly, as could everyone else on that floor.

With all I had to do, there was no way I was going to water a lawn my father would not see at least until spring. I have to admit I also was smarting from the fact that the lawn apparently was all the old man cared about anymore. Let it rot. Or dry out, in this case.

And it did. Every time I stopped by the house to pick up the mail, the grass was a little browner, a little more dried up, a little more like my dad himself.

As I stood at the screen door once more, reflecting on the irony of that, Bastard Beaumont came out with his pail of black goop and putty knife. "Out to pave the world," according to my father, and I finally got the pun. Like I said, I had always suspected my father was shrewder than he let on.

Just then, Looney Beaumont coasted down the driveway on her pink bike and jangled the bell as she turned out of their driveway.

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I wondered how everything could be so peculiarly the same, but so different.

Even now, nearly a month after my dad's stroke, his grass was still greener than the neighbors', though that rapidly was becoming a matter of degrees. The section under the trees was "Yellow-Green," the rest of the grass more "Green-Yellow." Small circles of "Forest Green" dotted the lawn where the Beaumont's dog was now freely "watering" the grass. My father would turn over in his grave—if he had one.

Then there were the two patches of "Goldenrod" verging on "Raw Umber." One of them was small—about a foot by two feet—the other, two by six. Set side by side and in the dead center of my father's lawn. A big one and a little one.

It reminded me of the story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* we had been reading at home. Only here, in my father's unnatural yard, there were only two: The mama bear and the baby bear.

And somehow, I knew nothing was just right.

I dug up my father's pristine front lawn in the summer heat that afternoon. Bastard Beaumont kept watch on me from across the street.

I almost stopped digging when I hit the lannon stone, thinking the shallowly buried stone explained the dead grass. But when the Irish setter jumped into the shallow hole to sniff, I pried up the corner of one of the large flat stones. There I found the tiny bones of a baby.

This time, when Bastard Beaumont called the police, I thanked him.

My mother's and my baby sister's bodies had been weighted down with flat stones left over from the building of the house. I'm not sure why—maybe he thought all the watering would cause them to float up somehow.

He refused to answer questions, preferring to stay hidden behind the symptoms of his stroke, as he had kept those shallow graves hidden beneath the green grass all those years.

Personally, I suspect he killed my sister simply for being born. Or perhaps she had died of natural causes, and he didn't think she merited a costly burial.

My mother, I fear, was expendable after having fulfilled her destiny of bearing a male child. Me.

My father never had much use for women. ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

THE MOUNTAIN OF JADE

by Edward D. Hoch

It was in May of 1900, following Ben Snow's Yucatan adventure, that he first heard about the mountain of jade and the game of bull and bear. He'd set off riding north toward home, but the nine-hundred-mile journey back to Texas was a long one for Oats to undertake without a break. In Tampico, on the way down, Ben had even considered buying a new horse. But he'd been set upon by bandits during the transaction and was only saved when the faithful Oats carried him away. At nineteen, Ben's horse was beginning to show its age, and for the first time he considered putting him out to stud back in Texas. Oats was such a gentle animal that people often mistook him for a gelding, but Ben knew the horse would still have the strength of a young stallion when it came to fathering a foal.

He avoided the Tampico route on the return trip and decided to stop overnight in San Cristóbal de Las Casas before heading north to Mexico City. It was there that he saw a placard for the game of bull and bear, and met the Englishman named Duffy Martin at a cantina. "Ever been to any of those bull-and-bear things?" Martin

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asked over a glass of tequila.

Ben shook his head. "First time in this area." The man had a pronounced English accent, but his weathered face and bleached moustache hinted at more time spent outdoors than in London drawing rooms. "What're they like?"

"Terribly cruel. The bull and bear are tethered and set upon by dogs until they're so wild they fight each other. Men make wagers on the outcome. Such so-called sports were popular in my country during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but I like to believe we're more civilized now. I have heard that the practice is still to be found on occasion in California and here in Chiapas. This has always been something of a rebel state, barely part of Mexico."

Edward D. Hoch's new Ben Snow story resulted from a report he read in the *New York Times* about a mother lode of jade roughly the size of Rhode Island which had been discovered in a densely forested region of the Guatamalan wilds, exposed following a deadly hurricane that hit the region in 1998. Transposing the discovery in time, to the Wild West of Ben Snow, provided a marvelous hook for a mystery filled with adventure and intrigue. ✝

Ben was curious about this Englishman so far from home. "Obviously that's not what brought you here."

"What? The bull and bear? Surely not!" Duffy Martin lit a thin black cigar. "No, I'm a mineralogist."

"Seeking gold like the Spaniards?"

"I'm a bit jaded for that," he replied, staring at Ben as if gauging the effect of his words. "May I buy you a tequila?"

"All right," Ben agreed.

When the drink arrived, the Englishman said, "I notice the way you wear your six-gun. You don't see many like that anymore. It's a quick-draw position, favored by gunfighters."

"You know a great deal about our customs."

"Are you for hire?" he asked, lowering his voice so Ben could barely hear it. "I might need a man like you where I'm going."

"Where would that be?"

"South, toward Guatemala. To the bull-and-bear game, actually, but only to meet someone." He mentioned a sum in Mexican pesos that he would pay for a week's work. "Maybe less than a week, depending on how things go."

"I don't kill people, except in self-defense."

"That's all I ask."

"You want a bodyguard?"

"Yes. This is rough country."

Ben nodded. "I've done that sort of work," he said, remembering

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once the previous year when he'd accompanied a circuit judge on his rounds in Arizona.

"Half the money now, half when we finish."

"Fair enough."

"We leave in the morning," the Englishman said. "It's just a few hours' ride south of here."

Duffy Martin was ready at dawn, saddling his roan horse at the stable when Ben came down from his room. They ate a light breakfast together, talking little, and then set off on the trail. Duffy wore an English gentleman's coat that reached below his hips and a flat, wide-brimmed hat to keep the sun off. He had no visible weapon, though he carried a thick walking stick that might have served as one at close quarters. For their journey he slipped the stick through the buckles of his saddlebags. "Have you ridden this way before?" he asked Ben once they were in motion.

"Not this far south. I've been all over the West, even up to Canada and Alaska, but not much down in Mexico."

"The bull-and-bear game is tomorrow morning. Our destination is near the Guatemalan border. The town will be full of natives, people from both countries. It is a gambling event. They bet on the outcome, and the number of minutes their favorite takes to achieve its victory. The man I will meet is named Carlos Tono. He is a gambler, but he also has something to sell me."

"What's that?"

"You might call it a treasure map if you were a mineralogist." But he said no more, and they rode in silence for a time.

Presently the trail widened and a few native shacks began to appear. They were approaching a village. Ahead, Ben could see small children playing in the dirt. At the center of the village they found a large black bear in a wooden cage. Men were gathered, staring at it, perhaps weighing its chances against the bull on the following morning.

Duffy Martin and Ben dismounted, leading their horses closer. "Where can a man place a bet around here?" Duffy asked one of the Mexicans.

Whether he understood the question or not, Ben had no way of knowing. The man simply pointed and said, "Cantina." Perhaps that was his answer for everything.

They tied their horses to a hitching post and went inside. The place was smaller and darker than the other cantinas to the north, but it had the same lingering odor, a combination of stale beer and male sweat. Duffy glanced around for someone who might speak English, then turned to Ben. "How's your Spanish?"

"I get by."

"Ask the bartender if he knows Carlos Tono."

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Ben asked the question in the best Spanish he could muster and the bartender merely shrugged. But a woman's voice answered in English from down the bar. "I know Tono. What do you want?"

The place was so dark Ben hadn't realized there was a woman present. Even now, knowing it, he could barely make out her features, only that her face was half hidden by long dark hair. Perhaps she was an Indian. "My friend here has come to meet Carlos Tono. Do you know where he is?"

The dark woman shook her head. "Not now. Tonight he will be at the Cruzeroses' party."

"Where is that?"

"Big house, down this road about two miles. You can't miss it."

"Thank you."

"Tonight," the Englishman repeated, none too happy. "The place will be filled with tourists from the north."

"Is the game that popular here?"

"In the off-season. The cities to the north have bullfights during the winter, but Mexican matadors prefer the cooler weather. No one down here fights bulls anymore, so the Cruzeroses arrange these contests with captured bears. It is probably illegal, but in this part of the country no one cares." He shrugged. "It is either that or cockfights."

"But you haven't come for that. You're here to meet this man Tono."

"That's correct. He has something valuable to sell me, if I can reach him before the others do."

As the woman had said, the Cruzeroses' house would have been hard to miss. Along a dusty road overgrown with woody, climbing plants and trees that seemed to reach toward heaven, they came upon a large adobe home with a tile roof and many windows. "This seems more like a hacienda," Duffy observed. "Many of them use the design of monasteries on a smaller scale."

They hitched their horses near several others. There was a scattering of carriages, too, indicating the area was not quite so sparsely settled as it seemed. A servant met them at the door. "Welcome to the home of Juan Cruzeros," he said, ushering them inside.

Following his direction, they passed through a covered gallery to an open patio at the center of the house where the party was in progress. A strikingly beautiful young woman wearing a clinging black silk dress and a matching mantilla excused herself from the conversation to come over to Ben. "I see that you found the way," she said, and Ben remembered her voice from the cantina.

"Hello again," he said. "I didn't recognize you at first."

"I'm not meant to be recognized when I'm away from here. There

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are too many bandits in the area." She held out her hand. "I am Maria Cruzeros."

"I'm pleased to meet you formally. You have a lovely house."

Duffy Martin had picked up a drink and joined them. "Surely you don't live out here to be near the bull-and-bear games," he said.

She smiled. "The hacienda was built by an archaeologist who spent many years here studying the Mayan civilization. My husband bought it only two years ago."

"We'd enjoy meeting him," Ben told her.

"And Carlos Tono, too," Duffy added.

"That's easy to do. At this moment they are together near the bar. Come with me." She led the way through the increasingly crowded patio to two men who seemed deep in conversation. It was immediately obvious that the gray-haired one wearing white leather was Juan Cruzeros, even before his hand circled his wife's back and patted her hip possessively. The other man, Carlos Tono, was dressed more casually, like a working vaquero, but without a visible weapon. A red birthmark covered much of his left cheek. Tono's expression did not change when they were introduced, but Ben noticed that Duffy gave him a firm handshake in greeting.

Cruzeros seemed impressed that an American and an Englishman had traveled all this distance to witness the fight. "Who do you favor tomorrow, the bull or the bear?"

"You've kept the bear caged," Ben pointed out, "while I assume the bull is free to roam the pastures. That makes a difference."

Juan Cruzeros smiled, dropping his hand to his wife's silken hip once more. "But which way? Will the bear be docile or enraged when it is released?"

"I would be enraged," Ben assured him.

"Come with me," the gray-haired man said suddenly. "I have something to show you all."

"Juan," Maria cautioned, but he pressed on.

Ben and Duffy followed him into a study off the covered gallery, and Tono tagged along. With obvious pride Cruzeros unlocked a cabinet and produced two intricately carved statuettes made of glassy blue stone. One was a bull and the other a bear. Each was about six inches high.

Ben thought he heard a sharp intake of Duffy Martin's breath as he asked, "What is this unusual blue stone?"

"Jade."

"Blue jade?"

Juan Cruzeros nodded. "A bluish green, really. My good friend Carlos here had them made for me. Blue jade was quite common in these parts during the Olmec and Mayan periods, and jade masks and jewelry have been found in tombs dating over thou-

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sands of years. But the source of the jade has never been located. Today we know mainly the green jade of the Far East."

"And where did you find this blue jade?" Duffy asked Carlos.

The vaquero grinned, showing two gold teeth. "There is a mountain of jade across the border in the Guatemalan wilds. Or more correctly, a mountain of jadeite, as the precious rock is known. Much of it is hidden by the jungle and it is rare when pieces of this size are found."

Ben took the jade statuettes and turned them over in his hands, examining the fine workmanship. On the bottom of each was a tiny mark that seemed to say *Obis.* Perhaps it was the sculptor's name. At that moment, though, Cruzeros and his wife were called on to greet some arriving guests. Their host returned the jade bull and bear to the cabinet and locked it, then escorted them out of the study.

Duffy planted a firm grip on Carlos Tono's shoulder. "What's this all about, friend? I thought we had a deal."

"We do," the vaquero whined. "Let me go!"

"I'm paying you for a map to the jade mountain."

"And you'll get it!"

"Where does Cruzeros fit in?"

"He doesn't. I gave him the bull and bear because he's sponsoring tomorrow's game. Everyone bets on the outcome. It brings in important money for me."

"Where's the map?" Duffy asked, keeping his voice low because there were others nearby in the patio.

"You'll get it when I get my money, not before."

"I want to see it first," the Englishman insisted. "I didn't come all this distance to be swindled by some Mexican confidence man."

Tono's eyes narrowed at the insult. Ben watched the man's hands but they made no move toward a weapon. "I do not carry the map with me," he said finally. "It is in a safe place. I will bring it to the game tomorrow. Meet me under the arena on the north side just as the fighting starts. Everyone will be watching it."

"All right," Duffy agreed. "I'll have the money with me."

The people Ben had seen at the Cruzeroses' hacienda were among the area's wealthier landowners. In the morning it was immediately obvious that they were but a small minority of the spectators at the game. Most were poor Indians and villagers from the surrounding territory, come for the spectacle as much as the chance of winning some pesos on their small bets. The game was to be held in a run-down bullring, perhaps a reminder of earlier days when the nation's matadors had made this a stop on their winter circuit. Now it was one of the few structures still standing in a nearly abandoned town.

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Maria Cruzeros had arrived at the bullring early, and she invited Duffy and Ben to sit with her. Today she was dressed less formally, wearing a Mexican riding costume with a hat tied at the back of her neck. Duffy wore a ruffled shirt and carried his walking stick as if attending a garden party back home. "What happened to the town here?" Ben asked out of curiosity. "It seems almost deserted."

She shrugged. "Bandits. The country is overrun with them. People would rather give up their homes and flee than remain with the constant threat of death."

"And yet you and your husband seem to have fared well."

"For those with money there is always another way."

"You pay them off?" Ben asked.

She did not answer directly but gestured across the bullring toward a bulky man wearing two pistols and crossed gun belts across his chest. "That is Santa Rosa," she said. "He is the worst of them. He would kill his mother if the price was right." She stood up. "I must go over and welcome him on behalf of my husband. It is always best to stay friendly with someone who could kill you."

Duffy Martin watched her walk away, threading a path through the crowd of spectators. "It's a dangerous place for a beautiful woman to live with bandits like that around."

Ben Snow agreed. "Makes me wonder what she was doing alone in that cantina yesterday."

The baiting had taken place outside the arena, and when the bear's cage was wheeled in it was obvious that this was an enraged animal eager to tear something apart. A wooden gate at the far end of the arena was thrown open and the bull came charging in just as the bear's keepers dropped open the side of its cage and scurried for cover.

"We have to go down now," Duffy said, and suddenly Ben Snow remembered the meeting with Carlos Tono.

"Would he want me along?"

"I want you along. Keep your hand near your gun."

Ben followed him down the rickety steps to the ground floor beneath the seats. Above them the crowd roared its approval of the action in the arena.

The light was dim under the stands, but Ben saw the figure of Carlos Tono leaning against one of the wooden support beams, awaiting them. "There he is!" Duffy exclaimed in the same instant, pointing with his walking stick as another roar went up from the crowd.

Tono was perhaps thirty feet away, moving awkwardly to one side. Ben's hand dropped to his six-gun, uncertain of the man's intentions. Then as they drew nearer he saw the trickle of blood from a small hole in Tono's shirt front. "He's been shot," Ben said,

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running the last several steps to the man's side, catching the body as it started a slow slide to the ground.

Duffy dropped to one knee. "Is he . . . ?"

"Dead. Looks like the bullet got him right through the heart."

"Quick! We must find that map!" Duffy's hands dipped into the pockets of the fringed jacket. Before they could search further, Juan Cruzeros appeared on the scene. "What has happened here?" he asked, alarm showing on his face.

"Your friend Tono has been shot," Duffy told him. "He's dead."

"My God! Who did it?"

"We saw no one," Ben informed him.

The roar from above was almost constant now. Juan Cruzeros lifted his eyes and said, "It's nearly over. To end this quickly the bull must be winning. If it manages to gore the bear in a vital spot the contest is short-lived." As he spoke, his hands were busy at the pockets of the dead man.

"What are you looking for?" Duffy asked him.

"The map, of course! I am not foolish, Mr. Martin. That is what we're both after, isn't it? Did you kill him?"

The question seemed directed at both of them so Ben answered. "He'd already been shot when we found him." Patting his revolver in its holster, he added, "My gun would have made a bigger hole than that. He was propped against this wooden pillar, probably shot minutes before we reached him."

"The killer might have had time to steal the map we all want so badly," Cruzeros told them.

"All?" Duffy repeated. "Who besides you and me?"

"It's no secret that the bandit Santa Rosa has heard about the mountain of jade, too. And my wife tells me he's here today. She spoke with him."

"He's here," Duffy confirmed.

"We'd better inform him of this killing. There are no police this far south and the army stays away. Santa Rosa and his bandits are the closest thing we have to law and order."

Ben couldn't believe what he was hearing. "For all we know it might have been Santa Rosa who killed him!"

"For what reason?"

"Even a successful bandit leader might be enticed by a map to a mountain of jade."

After a final cheer the crowd grew silent, and Cruzeros decided it was over.

He tore down one of the large placards announcing the game and used it to cover Tono's body. "It is best the crowd not see it," he explained.

Presently spectators began descending the steps. Gamblers were busy at the exits settling up wagers. Maria came down the steps

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to confirm that the bull had indeed won the battle with a bloody goring. "It was terrible," she said.

Her husband disagreed. "It is no worse than a bullfight. Less so, in fact, since matadors can be gored or even killed by the bull."

"What's that?" she asked, pointing to the placard-covered body.

"There was an accident," her husband told her. "Carlos Tono is dead."

"Oh no!" The color seemed to drain from her face.

"Is Santa Rosa still here?"

"I think so. I spoke with him just before the game began."

"I will go in search of him," Cruzeros said.

"Juan—"

"What is it, my dear?"

"Did you kill Tono?"

"Certainly not! I was in the stands watching the match." He moved away from them, heading for the stairs up to the seats. Maria lifted the placard and stared for a moment at the body. Then she turned to Ben and Duffy. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"I was supposed to meet him here on a business matter," the Englishman said. "It was arranged at your party last evening. Ben and I came looking for him. He was leaning against that wooden beam. When we reached him we saw the blood on the front of his shirt. He couldn't have been dead more than a few minutes."

"What was this business you had with him?"

"He had some pieces of jade that interested me, like the bull and bear carvings he gave your husband," Duffy said. "He claimed to have a map of a large jade deposit."

She scoffed at the news. "We have heard those rumors for as long as we have lived here. A mountain of jade, they say! I think Carlos Tono was a confidence man, playing Juan and you against each other, offering up an impossible dream. He wanted you and Juan to outbid each other for this supposed map, fighting for it like the bull and the bear. There is no mountain of jade and never was, unless it's somewhere in the Orient. It's certainly not here."

"You know a great deal about Tono," Ben observed. "Did he offer you an impossible dream, too?"

"What are you implying?" she asked angrily.

"You were at the cantina to meet someone yesterday. Was it Tono?"

Before she could answer, Ben turned to see her husband returning. He was trailed by the bandit leader Santa Rosa and two apparent bodyguards. The taller of the pair carried a shotgun in the crook of his arm, the other had a machete in his belt. Santa Rosa strode quickly to the body and lifted off the placard. "His name is Carlos Tono," Cruzeros told him.

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The bandit nodded. "I knew him. He was a gambler in his earlier days, before he found jade."

"Then you know about the jade!" Duffy Martin said.

"If there really is any. My men know nothing of it, except what Tono told them. He was not a man to be trusted."

"Could one of your men have shot him?"

Santa Rosa knelt and lifted the bloody shirt from the fatal wound. "Such a small hole for the bullet! No one here would use a pistol that small. It is a woman's weapon."

Maria Cruzeros smiled, holding her arms wide. "I am at your disposal, Señor Santa Rosa, if you wish to search me for the gun."

"Maria!" her husband growled. "It is not the time nor place for your bawdy humor."

The bandit chief eyed her firm, inviting body, as if considering the offer. Then he turned toward Ben Snow. "Hand over your pistol, please. Butt first."

"You can see it's too large a caliber to have fired the fatal shot."

Santa Rosa was not about to be challenged again. "Take it from him, Trazo," he told the bodyguard on his left.

The man drew the machete from his belt and moved forward quickly. Ben had only an instant to react, and his hand went for the gun as the machete blade arced toward him. Then, almost faster than the eye could follow, Duffy Martin swung his walking stick into the machete's path with a clanging impact that sent the machete flying. Ben had his pistol out before anyone else could move. Santa Rosa's hand signaled the other guard with the shotgun to stay calm.

"Let's talk this over," Ben suggested.

Juan Cruzeros glanced distastefully at the body. "What about him?"

Speaking rapidly in Spanish, Santa Rosa instructed his men to remove Tono's corpse. Then he led the rest of them into a little office that overlooked the bullring. Ben could see some men removing the dead bear's carcass while others swept away the bloodstained dirt. He wondered if the bodyguards would be sweeping away Carlos Tono's blood, too. There was no sign of the victorious bull, but a few fans of the game still remained in the arena watching the cleanup.

"What have we here?" the bandit chief asked, sitting behind an old desk as if he was in charge. Perhaps Cruzeros had been right about this being the closest thing to law and order in southern Mexico. "The man is shot to death in cold blood? He did not even have a weapon to defend himself? Who would do that?"

"Someone who wanted the map to the jade mountain," Duffy suggested. "It was gone when we searched his body."

"How do you know he had it with him?" Santa Rosa asked.

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"He said he would bring it. That was part of his arrangement with me."

"He had promised the map to me also," Cruzeros told them. "How much were you paying for it, Englishman?"

"Enough," Duffy replied, still not ready to reveal much. "But he was playing us both for suckers, wasn't he? There never was a map."

"Unless his killer found it and took it." Cruzeros turned his eyes toward Santa Rosa as he spoke.

"I agree with our English friend," the bandit leader said. "I told you Tono could not be trusted. The rumors of jade are old news in these parts."

Ben was remembering that Maria Cruzeros had told him the same thing. He wondered if that was a coincidence or if Maria had conversed with Santa Rosa about Tono. "There seems to be general agreement, then," Ben observed. "Tono's supposed map was a fraud."

But Juan Cruzeros was far from convinced. "He brought me the jade statuettes of the bull and bear. Where did he get them if the whole thing is a fraud?"

Ben remembered the marking on the bottom of the two carvings. "Does the name *Obis* mean anything to you?"

Cruzeros looked blank but Santa Rosa's expression registered some recognition. "That could be Obistuan, a stone carver in Tapachula, on the Guatemalan border."

"Perhaps Tono did not find the jade himself," Ben suggested. "This stone carver, Obistuan, might be the source of it. How long a ride is it to Tapachula?"

The bandit leader shrugged. "A few hours. It is near the Pacific coast."

"Perhaps Duffy and I could go there and question this man about the jade."

Maria glanced at her husband and some unseen message may have passed between them. "If you go, I go," he told Duffy and Ben. "After all, we are now friendly rivals for this treasure of jade."

"If it exists," Duffy said. And if they really were friendly rivals, Ben added silently.

They waited till morning, then got an early start on the ride to Tapachula. At first there were only to be Ben and Duffy and Juan Cruzeros, but at the last minute Maria decided to ride along. "If he has any jade as lovely as that bull and bear I might want to buy something," she explained.

They'd been on the trail about an hour, heading southwest toward the ocean, when Santa Rosa and his two henchmen appeared on the trail ahead. Trazo still wore the machete in his belt and the other, called Maldito, carried his shotgun in a saddle holster. Apparently they'd come by a different route to intercept

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the riders. Ben patted Oats to calm him as they slowed to a trot. "What brings you here?" Cruzeros called out to Santa Rosa.

"I woke this morning worried for your safety," the bulky man answered. He still wore the crossed gun belts on his chest. "These trails are the hunting grounds of local bandits. My men and I offer you protection on your journey to Tapachula."

Duffy snorted and said quietly to Ben, "Better to be killed by the bandit you know."

Santa Rosa rode in front with Cruzeros and Duffy while his two men brought up the rear. Maria and Ben were neatly sandwiched between them. It was a sunny morning with the temperature already mildly uncomfortable. "Tell me about the cantina yesterday. You went there to meet Tono, didn't you?"

She shrugged. "Rural Mexico can be a lonely place at times. There is no harm in a little flirtation. I didn't kill him, if that's what you think." She spurred her horse and rode up to join her husband.

Happily, the ride to Tapachula was shorter than expected and they'd been on the trail only about two and a half hours when the town's adobe buildings came into view. A few Mexicans passed them on the trail, but took no notice. The town was an obvious trading center for the southern area and a crossing point from neighboring Guatemala. It was Santa Rosa who seemed to know where they would find the sculptor, and he led them to a tiny shop near the town's only church. Santa Rosa and his men waited with the horses while Ben followed Duffy and the Cruzeroses inside.

It was immediately clear that this was the source of the jade carvings. Several shelves were lined with them, including bulls, bears, and other animals similar to the ones Carlos Tono had presented to Cruzeros. Spread on the counter were smaller pieces of jade jewelry.

Duffy asked the small Indian woman behind the counter if Obistuan was in the shop. "I am Obistuan," she replied, in English, with a smile that revealed two gold teeth.

"These are your carvings?"

"Yes."

"They are amazing," Cruzeros joined in. "A man named Carlos Tono recently bought two of your figurines, a bull and a bear, to present to me." He gestured toward the shelves. "These are all carved from jade?"

"Many are," she responded. "When the supply of jade is low I use other stones."

"But where does the jade come from?" Duffy wanted to know.

"Travelers from Guatemala bring pieces they find in riverbeds, especially along the Motagua River. The spring floods wash them down from the heavens. Our culture tells us there was much jade before the coming of the Spaniards, but they were more interested in gold and silver."

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"Do you remember this man Tono?" Maria wanted to know.

She shrugged. "I have many customers."

"He had a red birthmark on his left cheek," Ben told her, patting his own face to make the point.

Her eyes sharpened. "Yes, I remember. He came last month. He had some pieces of jade to sell me and I traded the bull and bear for them."

"Had you seen him before?"

She nodded. "He crosses the border from time to time. He is a jade hunter."

"Where does he find it?" Duffy asked.

"He told me he has a map."

"Did you see it?"

"No, but he tells me there is much more to be found. He says he will be a wealthy man someday. Is this possible?"

"Not for Carlos Tono," Maria told her. "He was killed yesterday at the bull-and-bear game."

The news seemed to horrify her. "By the animals?"

"Someone shot him," Juan Cruzeros explained. "Apparently they stole his map."

She thought about that, her face a grim mask. "You have come here looking for the map?"

"If the killer has the map, he may have headed this way, toward the border," Duffy explained.

The Mexican woman nodded slightly, as if in agreement. "A copy of this map could be available. How much would it be worth?"

Cruzeros mentioned a moderate sum. To this Indian woman it might have sounded like a fortune. "I will see," she said. "I cannot promise."

"When will you know?"

"Come back this afternoon, at siesta time."

Outside, Cruzeros told Santa Rosa what little they'd learned. The bandit chief agreed to remain until siesta time, but later Duffy Martin was none too pleased. "If she produces another map he'll kill us for it. He's probably the one who shot Tono!"

Ben wasn't convinced. "If he shot Tono for the map, he wouldn't need another copy, would he?"

"He would if Tono didn't have it on him after all."

"But he was meeting you to sell it. You told him you had to see it first."

The Englishman shook his head. "I don't like any of this. Santa Rosa could kill us both without anyone ever knowing."

"Cruzeros and his wife would know."

"He could kill them, too, if it meant getting the map to the mountain of jade. I say you and I turn back now while we still can."

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"Let's wait until the siesta and see if Obistuan comes up with anything."

The others rode back to a cantina they'd passed, but Ben lingered at the little shop, telling them he'd be along shortly. Duffy was not pleased. "I hired you as a bodyguard. You should be at my side all the time."

"I'll just be five minutes," Ben told him. "I want to see what she does."

When he reentered Obistuan's shop she glanced up from her carving. "I do not have the map yet," she told him. "Siesta time."

"I think you have a whole drawer full of maps. You probably wrap your carvings in them."

"No, no!"

"Did Carlos Tono get his map from you?"

"He had his own," she insisted. "I never saw it."

"And your map?"

She reached under the counter and pulled one out. It showed a section of the Guatemalan interior near the Motagua River. "This is as good as any for a place that no longer exists."

"There is no jade mountain?"

She shook her head. "Bits and pieces are all that anyone finds. But every few years someone new comes looking. I sell many maps."

"You will sell one more this afternoon."

She studied his face. "You will not tell them?"

"I want to see their reactions to your map. I think one of them will know at once that it is not the real thing."

He left her and rode back to the cantina where the others had already ordered food and drink. "What were you doing?" Maria asked him.

"Watching her. I think she went off somewhere to get the map."

Around two o'clock, when the town's shops began to shut down for siesta, Santa Rosa made his move. "We go now," he decided, "to see this carver of jade."

There was a breeze blowing in from the ocean, dry and hot, raising little eddies of dust in the almost deserted streets. The horses were feeling the heat, too, and Cruzeros suggested they leave them tied where they were and walk back to Obistuan's shop. Santa Rosa agreed, though Ben saw the man called Maldito slip his shotgun from the saddle holster.

At first the little shop seemed empty, but then Obistuan emerged from the back room. "Do you have the map?" Cruzeros asked.

"I have it here." She spread it out on the counter.

"That's not the map!" Duffy Martin insisted, and Ben wished he'd had the presence of mind to keep quiet.

"How do you know that?" Maria asked.

It was Ben Snow's turn to answer, much as he hated turning on

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his employer. "Because he has the real map. He took it from Tono's pocket after he shot him."

Duffy turned on him, waving his walking stick. "That's crazy! You're my bodyguard. You never left my side at the bull-and-bear fight. How could I have shot Tono without your knowing?"

"When we came upon him, even in the dim light, I thought he was moving. And when we reached his body there was only a trickle of blood at first. It was as if he'd been shot virtually as we watched. Later I remembered you'd pointed your walking stick at him. And when you blocked Trazo's machete with your stick, there was the clang of metal on metal. That stick is an air gun, of the more powerful and deadly European variety I've heard about. The noise of the crowd above us covered the slight sound it made when you fired."

In that instant, Santa Rosa could see only the deadly walking stick pointed in his direction. His hand dropped to his gun and Duffy fired in reaction. Ben heard a faint sound like a whiz of air and saw the tiny red spot appear on Santa Rosa's chest. In the same instant, Maldito fired his shotgun point-blank into the Englishman's chest. Ben's own bullet hit Maldito's shoulder before he could fire again, but it was too late for Duffy Martin. Ben had failed in his job as Duffy's bodyguard.

There was no hope for the Englishman, but in examining his terrible wound they found the remains of Carlos Tono's map. "He had hidden it under his shirt," Cruzeros said. "There's nothing left of it."

"It must have been folded up in Tono's pocket," Ben surmised. "Duffy could easily have palmed it while searching the body. He had to pretend to go along with our search for the map so he wouldn't be suspected of having it himself."

"It's no good to anyone now," Cruzeros decided. "And neither is this one." He tossed Obistuan's map back onto the counter.

"Santa Rosa is dead," Maria announced from across the floor.

Cruzeros motioned to the frightened bodyguards. "Get out of here! Find a doctor to treat that shoulder wound and then keep on going. If I ever see either of you again I'll kill you myself."

Ben picked up the fallen walking stick, examining its hidden firing mechanism. The air gun's metal barrel was covered with a thin veneer of wood that still bore the gouge of Trazo's machete. The Mexican woman, Obistuan, poked her head from behind the counter. "Is the shooting stopped?"

Maria went to comfort her while Cruzeros asked Ben, "Is there no way we can find that mountain of jade?"

"Not now," Ben told him. "I'll be riding north. The jade is your problem. But I wouldn't be surprised if it's another hundred years before anyone really finds it." ●

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ROGUES' GALLERY

by Robert Barnard

When the gallery of the Palazzo Cenci-Corombona was about to be opened for the first time to the public there was a private viewing in advance of opening for art critics and newspaper columnists, and a further one two days later for princes, dukes, counts, and the assorted riffraff of Roman Society. On the first of these days the critics strolled around the high and densely packed rooms and galleries, sniffing a little at the dim Teniers landscapes, raising an eyebrow at allegorical nothings by Angelica Kauffmann, wondering whether the rubrick under the Caravaggio shouldn't have read "School of," and generally being interested rather than impressed.

Antonio Scaltri ("Toni" to his friends), the art critic of the *Corriere della Mattina,* went round rather more quickly than most, because he'd given the collection the once-over at a party two or three years before. It was only when he came to a little alcove with a curtain across the entrance and the legend "Van Dyck Room" above it that his interest was quickened. He did not remember a Van Dyck in the collection. As he reached to draw aside the curtain a light automatically came on in the little side room, and he registered that there was only one picture, and turned to look at it. For some seconds he was speechless.

"Dio mio!" he said at last. Then, since he was an international expert on seventeenth-century portraiture, known in five continents, he added in English: "Wow!"

The idea of opening up the gallery wing of the palazzo had come to Prince Paolo, or been fed to him, one day after lunch, when his

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wife had driven off in her new Smart car, which parked in half the space of a normal car and cost decidedly more than one—ideal for her afternoon round of visits to her smart middle-aged friends to talk about ancestry and clothes, and to the current smart boutique to do the same. The son and heir was out with his younger smart friends, speeding around the town high on heroin or alcohol, and probably with the current bimbo to whom the prince so strongly objected, though when it came to brains most people would feel that she and the young heir were ideally suited.

So the prince could meditate on his financial predicament.

The Cenci-Corombonas were only a distant branch of the great Cenci line, but like them they believed in keeping things within the family. In their case this meant hoarding their wealth, adding to it in safe, traditional ways, and handing status and loot on unimpaired from one generation to the next. They delighted in profitable, risk-free positions such as the prince's own vice-chairmanship of the Banco dei Ladri Siciliani. This policy, however, had been subtly changed in the last twenty years by Prince Paolo. Where his ancestors had despised the stock exchange as being full of dubious characters of low birth and harebrained projects, the prince had decided that it was the only way for a wealthy family to prosper in the modern world. Unfortunately, he had entered into this new world with more enthusiasm than flair. He had invested a great deal of money into software companies that were all prospectus and no funds, and into the firms created by the privatisation of the British railways, having always been an Anglophile by inclination. It was two weeks after the declared bankruptcy of Railtrack that the prince sat at table, with coffee and brandy, and entertained thoughts of the most gloomy.

"If I sell a picture," he said to Silvio, his butler, with whom he had, in truth, more in common than with any of his family, "it will have to be a good one."

"That would be sad, sir," murmured Silvio.

"Sell one of the lesser ones and it would only bring in a few million lire. Tide me over for a few months and that would be all."

"On the other hand, sell one of the good ones, sir, and it would make the collection much less interesting were you ever to decide to open it to the paying public," said Silvio, making a judicious exit.

The prince's mind ticked over slowly, but a minute or two later he said aloud: "What a peach of an idea!"

He could open the gallery separately, so there would be no vulgar intrusion on the family part of the palace, and he would charge twelve or fifteen thousand lire admission (what would that be in Euros?), and prepare a lavish and glossy guidebook himself, free of the doubts and condescensions of the professional art histo-

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rians. The Doria Pamphilj family had been doing it for years, and the tourists flocked to their undesirably placed palace at the bottom of the Via del Corso. Opening a gallery would mean that he could keep all his pictures and create a regular and continuing source of income. It was a brilliant, brilliant idea!

It was characteristic of the prince, who was not optimistic by nature except in his gambling and his share dealings, that by the time Silvio returned for the coffee cups, he had spotted a snag.

"That idea about opening the gallery to the public . . ." he said.

"Sir?"

"The Doria Pamphilj do, and they pull in the masses. But they've got one marvellous picture."

"The Velasquez of Innocent the Tenth, sir. Quite."

"That's it. I knew you'd remember. One of the greatest portraits ever painted, they say, and popularised by that English johnny."

"Bacon, sir. Francis Bacon."

"I knew the name was familiar. Well, the truth is, good though our collection is, we haven't got anything of absolutely first-class standard. Not anything that would stand out and bring in the hoi polloi."

Silvio coughed. "Aren't you forgetting the Van Dyck, sir?"

Since in fiction only brilliant ideas, rather unrealistically, seem to emanate from butlers, it is only fair (since the prince in the preparations for opening always referred to the idea as his own) to underline that it was the butler of the Palazzo Cenci-Corombona who bore the responsibility for originating this particular brilliant wheeze.

The suggestion of Silvio certainly presented the prince with problems, both of a familial and a practical nature: Would the exhibition of that particular picture, remarkable though it was, redound to the credit of the family, or—more important—attract visitors to the gallery?

The elevation of Cardinal Aldo Cenci-Corombona to the papacy in 1623 represented a distinct deviation from the family's traditional avoidance of positions of prominence that demanded integrity, public scrutiny, or hard work. His surprising promotion arose from a situation familiar to those choosing the winner of the Booker Prize or the next leader of the Conservative Party. In the conclave to choose a successor to Pope Gregory XV there were two brilliant candidates, both with roughly equal support: There was the Cardinal-Archbishop of Pistoia, a man of notable piety who had very little control over his lawless flock, and there was Cardinal Salvini, a member of the Vatican's administrative hierarchy, who had a genius for organisation extending from the high ground of strategy and policy to the low ground of who cooked the papal

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polenta, but who was someone who never let "that religious nonsense" interfere with his grand or his little schemes. These two candidates dominated the first six attempts to select a new pontiff, and as the crowds in St. Peter's Square waited in vain for the puff of smoke that would give them the news that a new pope had been chosen, the cardinals sweated for three weeks of a Roman summer, quarrelled among themselves, missed their mistresses, and got shorter and shorter tempered. One died, another lost whatever reason he had ever had. A compromise candidate had to be found. That candidate was Cardinal Cenci-Corombona of Naples.

That much might be found in any official account of that particular papal election. What it would probably not include were the rumours. These told that Cardinal Cenci-Corombona, immediately on the death of Gregory XV, had made a very shrewd assessment of who the leading candidates would be and their probable level of support. In the world of today he would have made a superb bookmaker of a rather dodgy kind. Foreseeing a likely stalemate, he had told all and sundry that his doctor had diagnosed him as suffering from the wasting disease of phthisis, and had given him only six months to live. Six months! That suited the supporters of the other two candidates down to the ground. The College of Cardinals was elderly (apart from the scapegrace "nephews" of the two previous popes), and numbers could change dramatically in six months.

So, as a compromise candidate, the cardinal was elected Supreme Pontiff, and reigned as Julius IV for the next nineteen years.

It was in the year after his election, 1624, that the new pope was painted by the rising star of Flemish painting, then on a long-term stay in Italy. Van Dyck was gentle, retiring, and notably sitter-friendly, softening ugliness to mere ordinariness, reducing obvious villainy to mere worldliness. With all his enthusiasm and hopefulness, the young painter was bemused as to how to paint the new pontiff. Julius was small, twisted in body, unprepossessing to the nth degree. But pity can be aroused for an unsightly exterior. What made the problems of presentation almost insurmountable was the face—mean, beetle-browed, gnarled into a perennial expression of rage and loathing that directed itself on his interlocutors—and hence on the painter of his portrait—with terrifying force and intensity. Van Dyck confessed himself beaten.

"I try," he confessed to his Flemish friends at the inn off the Piazza Navona where they met at nights. "I try so hard—to give him dignity, benignity, even pathos. Nothing will help. Something—I don't know what—keeps breaking through."

"I think it's called Evil," said his friend Sustermanns.

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Certainly Van Dyck took the finished painting to the Vatican with no high hopes. He shivered as he removed the covering veil. The new pope was outraged, incandescent. After ten minutes of rant he had the upstart painter kicked out as unceremoniously as that other upstart Mozart was later to be by the Archbishop of Salzburg.

Nourishing his hurt and his grievance, Van Dyck returned to his home base in Genoa, where he worked night and day for three weeks on the picture, removing all the softening effects he had vainly tried to introduce, attempting finally to capture the atmosphere of brutal malignity which the pope communicated to all who came into contact with him. When he had achieved to his own satisfaction a version which captured the hellish horror of the man, he offered it to the Cardinal-Archbishop of Pistoia, the new pope's saintly rival, who accepted it with alacrity.

"I need to be reminded," he said via his envoy, "that Satan does indeed walk among us."

It was from descendants of that man's brother that the Cenci-Corombonas bought the picture in the early 1700s, immediately putting it in store in an inaccessible part of their cellar. They had no desire to remind Romans of the pontificate of Julius IV, and were glad to prevent anyone else doing so.

It was in that same inaccessible cellar that Prince Paolo, accompanied by Silvio, had viewed the picture soon after he became head of the family in 1978. It was from there that they removed it when the time came to open the gallery to the public in 2001.

"Dio mio!" said Toni Scaltri of the *Corriere della Mattina.* "Wow!"

The man in the picture that overwhelmed him had all the trappings of the papacy as assuredly as Innocent X did in the famous portrait by Velazquez that the prince had alluded to: the purple-red of the vestments and biretta, the thronelike chair, the mozzetta, and the token sign of piety, too, in Julius's case a prayer book in his right hand. But the trappings could only serve to highlight the face: topping the hunched-forward body it thrust itself at you, seeming to deliver a rebuke at you—no, not a rebuke, Toni decided, but a string of vituperative obscenities from that twisted mouth, beneath that flaring nose and that mean, grasping, low brow. But that inventory missed out on the eyes. Through the grime of centuries—for Silvio had wisely advised against cleaning the picture, feeling the force of it would be more generally acceptable from appearing beneath a veneer of dirt—they still seemed to consume both themselves and the viewer by their flaming rage and hatred. Satan indeed, said Toni to himself, unconsciously echoing the archbishop's words: Satan viewing the world's last

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vestiges of goodness and piety with outrage, and issuing a strident proclamation of war.

For five minutes Toni stood alone before this great unseen portrait of his chosen century. Then he staggered back to his fellow critics and newsmen, feeling weakened by the experience. Confronting their polite indifference to the body of the collection Toni had difficulty finding appropriate words.

"Wait till you see the Van Dyck," he warned them. "It's . . . tremendous. . . . Too much . . . Too horrible."

Something similar was said two nights later at the special society viewing by Paolo's wife, Princess Francesca, who looked into the room with her friend the Countess Malatesta, glanced at the picture, then looked hurriedly away.

"Too ghastly, my dear," she muttered to her friend. "Just too hideously ugly. But you wouldn't expect looks or style from a pope, would you? Especially not a Cenci-Corombona one."

For the princess was born a Strozzi, and had nothing but contempt for the parvenu branch (four and a half centuries) of the family she had lowered herself into by marriage. Her friend gazed at the picture for a minute as if mesmerised, then dragged her eyes away with a harsh laugh.

"He looks like a dustman dressed up for Carnival," she said.

The two preliminary viewings certainly paid off. The news of an extraordinary picture of an ancestor of the Cenci-Corombonas filtered down from the society guests as wealth is supposed to but seldom does. The critics sent out a great buzz of interest, and Toni Scaltri, feeling the need as the greatest expert in the field to absorb the experience before writing about it, postponed coming to terms with this unexpected side to the gentle and pliable Flemish master by adding a final note to his fortnightly piece urging readers to go hotfoot to the Palazzo and view the extraordinary new picture which had previously been kept exclusively within the family. "See it, see it, see it," he urged, promising to return to the subject at length in his next article.

The results of this interest were very gratifying. From the moment the doors opened, there was a constant trickle of visitors, which augmented itself into a minor stream when the tour guides realized they had a new and extraordinary experience to offer their more discriminating parties. The prince hovered around on the gallery's outskirts, watching who bought the new glossy guide, which firms brought the best-dressed American and Japanese parties, who talked most discerningly about the collection. In the early days he dressed very casually, hoping to be mistaken for a workman, but as the success of the enterprise became obvious he resumed his English tweeds (for winter was drawing on) and started thinking of himself as a man of some importance in Rome.

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None of his family had been that since Prince Marcello in the mid-nineteenth century, who had been in the party that welcomed to the city Vittorio Emanuele II as the new king of Italy and had become his first interpreter, translating his guttural Savoyard dialect pronouncements into an Italian the Romans could understand, then going on to pimp for his son Umberto I, a job that gave him greater aesthetic satisfaction but which finally had to be given up when the workload proved too great. Now the family had another man of influence at its head.

Unfortunately, Toni Scaltri's article never got finished. He suffered a massive heart attack just when he was approaching its peroration. However, his newspaper, somewhat ghoulishly, published the piece "just as he left it," thus allowing their readers to share Toni's last thoughts on one of the great figures of his chosen century:

> "It is as if this mild-mannered, ingratiating young man from Antwerp had, thus early in his career, an experience that rid him of all anger, all bile—as if he painted out of himself in this one picture all urge to be totally honest about his subjects, just by reason of the fact that he, for this once only, had captured a true monster in all his hideous monstrosity. This extraordinary pic "

"It is at this point," said the *Corriere della Mattina,* adapting the words of Toscanini on the first night of *Turandot,* "that the Master laid down his pen." The article created a still greater furor by reason of its macabre unfinished state.

Princess Francesca played little part in the early success of the new gallery. Her friend the Countess Malatesta was stricken with a terrible illness which her doctors pronounced on most learnedly to conceal their total mystification. As she began at last to recover, they prescribed a lengthy stay away in the warm south of the country, to avoid the nip of a Roman winter. The princess was desolated by her loss.

"Apparently she just lay there," she told her husband, watching his face closely, "and all she said was, 'The eyes, the eyes.' " Her husband, from long practice, kept his face totally impassive.

He had heard a day or two before that an American party had suffered no less than two deaths in the days after their visit to the Gallery Cenci-Corombona. By chance he had observed this particular party, and had estimated the average weight of its members to be around twenty stone. He had amused himself by wondering about the economics of hiring a forty-seater coach that could only accommodate twenty posteriors. He wasn't surprised at two heart attacks occurring to greatly overweight people in the stressful environment of Rome, but he expressed his princely sympathy to the company, as he did to the relatives of an elderly Swedish lady

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who had gone off her head the day after her visit. He did wonder why he had been informed of these unfortunate occurrences, and it did not occur to him that people were playing around with the idea of suing for compensation.

Because talk was getting around. The ridiculous words "evil eye" were gaining currency. In the wake of talk about deaths and near-deaths there came talk about the picture: nonsense about people who had seen it bathed in a hellish red light, about terrible eyes that seemed to spew sparks, more tales about disaster occurring to those who had gazed too long or commented too scathingly on the subject. Some, such as Silvio, who saw the painting often in the course of their duty, felt that some process of internal heat was burning away the dirt of centuries, to reveal the blazing eyes as more terrible each day. The talk even got into the popular press. "It is as if the evil spirit of the painting, dampened by centuries gathering dust in a cellar, has gradually reawakened, has flexed its diabolical muscles, and is now wreaking vengeance on the unfortunate visitors to the Gallery Cenci-Corombona," said one daily paper too low to be taken at the Palazzo, but seen by Silvio.

That piece alone was enough to scare the tour operators. Americans are the most timorous tribe on earth and, after the Italians, the most superstitious. The numbers on the pre-booked tours dwindled, as many chose to go shopping on the Via Veneto instead. Then tours were cancelled altogether, with no reason given. Casual Italian visitors now passed the doorway of the Palace with a boding shake of the head. Silvio, anguished by self-blame, joined his master in watching the daily comings and goings in the gallery, and listening to the comments. So few were coming that it would soon cease to be a viable concern. Those that did come viewed the dim and dusty body of the collection, but when they came to the Van Dyck Room they sped by it. "You wouldn't catch me going in there," they heard one English visitor say. Another claimed to have seen a terrible light penetrating even the thick velvet curtains, and had heard supernatural music.

"I'm afraid, sir," Silvio said *sotto voce* one day to his master, as they stood in the long gallery that ended in the Van Dyck Room, "that the experiment is running into difficulties."

"Nonsense," said the prince, though the heartiness in his voice rang false. "It's just that the novelty has worn off for the moment. The numbers will pick up again."

"It's the recent publicity," insisted Silvio. "People don't forget that kind of thing. I don't see the numbers ever recovering from the stories of people dying after coming here."

"Pooh, pooh! It will take more than the nonsense in the Rome scandal sheets to destroy this gallery. Their sensations are five-

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day ones. They will soon be forgotten and people will start streaming back."

"Nevertheless, I wonder whether we should continue to show the Van Dyck."

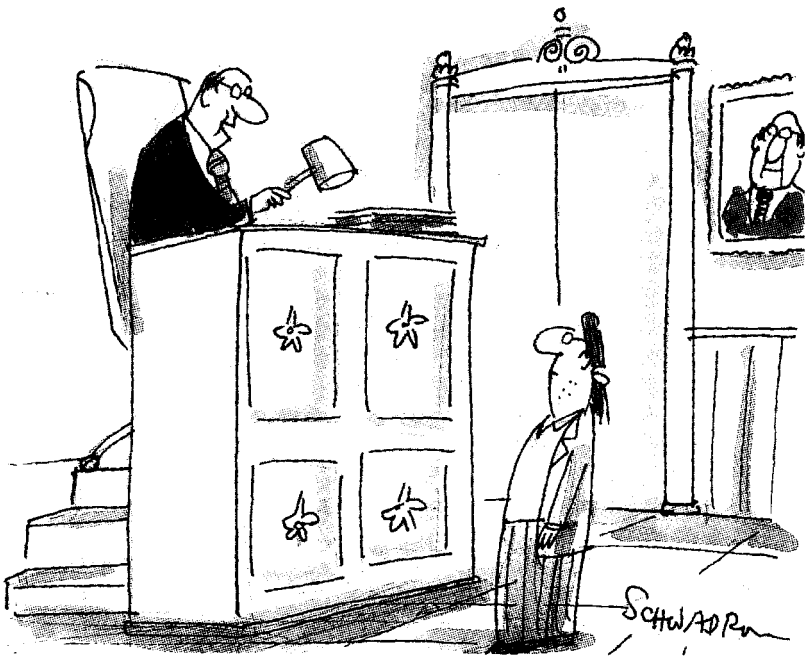
"But the collection is nothing without that—at least not specially remarkable," amended the prince hurriedly. "Showing the Pope Julius was a brilliant suggestion on your part."

It was the first time Silvio had heard his own part in the creation of the gallery acknowledged—when failure was staring them in the face. It irked him.

"Nevertheless, I notice that you don't go and view the picture, sir," he said.

"Why would I? That ugly old scamp means less than nothing to me. Why should I ruin my digestion looking at him?" Silvio remained silent. The prince, rightly, thought he was being challenged. "Oh well, if you think it would restore confidence . . . "

Squaring his shoulders, without so much as a glance at his fairly loyal butler, Prince Paolo set his long, tweed-clad legs in motion and, watched by the little knots of visitors to the gallery, strode past his Teniers and his Sustermanns, further, further down the long room until, unlucky gambler to the last, he pulled aside the heavy curtain and entered the brightly lit alcove. ●



"Please stop answering every question with 'You'll have to read my book.'"

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DEADLY COPY

by Charles McConnell

Half unconscious, head throbbing, little irregular bright lights darting in and out of his vision, Harry Belmont found himself being dragged to his feet by what felt like a dozen arms. As the fog began to lift it turned out there were just four arms, a mere two pair, belonging to two men—Mr. O'Connor and Mr. Dwight, he thought—one on either side of him.

Harry remembered seeing something that resembled a pair of small gray tombstones on the floor, two strange little grave markers tilted slightly away from each other. He tried to blink away the haze, and as he focused on the two small gray tombstones he saw they were actually shoe soles. His eyes traveled upward across a length of rumpled gray trousers and settled on a wrinkled expanse of white shirt bearing two red stains—a rather large one in the area of the heart, and a much smaller one nearby, from which the handle of a gold-colored implement protruded. As his jaw dropped and he shook his head as though to jolt the image from his vision, Mr. O'Connor said quietly, his voice tense with shocked disbelief, "What in hell have you done, Belmont?"

A hospital administrator who has served as editor of a quarterly health-care journal and written several books in the health field, Charles McConnell began selling his short fiction in the 1970s. Since then he has had a number of stories published in both *EQMM* and our sister publication *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. His work was also included in the MWA anthology *Last Laughs* (Mysterious Press, 1986). ¶

It was four and a half days earlier that Harry Belmont first saw the woman with the streaks in her hair. He stopped dead in his tracks, his heartbeat going into overdrive. His initial view was her profile. Her lips were full, her chin strong, her nose perfectly formed. The one eyebrow he could see was a feline arc reaching upward toward her temple. As he willed her to turn toward him,

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she did so and he melted inside when he saw her round, dark, black-lashed eyes, circles of wonder that made her appear slightly startled. Her plentiful brown hair was swept up and back into a large beehive that defied gravity, and the lighter streaks zigzagged up the side of the beehive like swirls of ribbon candy.

It was when she moved again, small, abrupt motions that were at once feminine and birdlike, that Harry fully understood why the sight of this woman he had never seen before took his breath away and made his heart beat faster. He was looking at his secret love from dozens of video viewings and a couple of Halloween specials, the young Elsa Lanchester. This woman resembled Elsa Lanchester as the Bride of Frankenstein.

Her eyes swept past Harry to settle on something beyond his right shoulder. Her lips worked impatiently as she peered at whomever or whatever she was watching, and Harry took her in unabashedly. *Belmont,* he told himself, *your dream has arrived. She's the one.*

On this fine Monday morning it was that quickly that Harry Belmont fell head over heels for the woman who looked like the Bride of Frankenstein. He had not an inkling that before the week was out he would have preferred to have crossed paths with the real thing instead of this stunning duplicate.

A man came from behind Harry and joined the woman. He lightly grasped her elbow and she turned and they walked toward the entrance to the First National tower, a forty-story building with banking on the lower two floors and the offices of various firms above. Harry watched his Elsa—he had already come to think of her as Elsa, not to mention *his*—disappear through the revolving door, guided gently by the man who so far had been no more to Harry than the broad back of a gray suit and a balding crown surrounded with frizzy brown hair.

Harry was blankly watching the door swallow more people when a voice beside him, the flat monotone he knew so well, said, "Harry, we better get inside. They want us at eight o'clock and it's almost eight now and we got to get to the fifteenth floor."

Harry turned toward his friend and work partner, Dink Martin. Dink, at about six-foot-four, was named Melvin but as a teen had been dubbed Dink—for Dinky—for being the "runt of the litter," the youngest and smallest of five boys. He had a naturally erect posture, a strong, square jaw and handsome features, straw-blond hair, and a pair of round blue eyes that seemed rarely to blink and upon brief exposure made one wonder whether there was anybody home.

"Harry," Dink repeated, "we got to go to work."

"Yeah, kid." Harry sighed, reluctantly abandoning fantasies of his Elsa. "Let's get to it. The agency said where?"

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"Fifteenth floor." Dink pulled a file card from his shirt pocket and read, "Company called Gordon, Heggie, Walton, and Frye. They take up fifteen and sixteen but they want us to report to Mr. O'Connor on fifteen."

Harry sighed again. "Another copy job?"

"Yeah. About a week's worth, they said, maybe a little more."

"Jeez, we oughta get away from this temporary-agency stuff and get a couple of real jobs."

"Yeah, Harry, maybe next week." Dink no longer mentioned that Harry seemed to have trouble holding on to a "real job" for more than a few days at a time.

They entered the building, this strange pair—one tall, blond, deliberate in movement as though always conserving energy, the other a foot shorter, with dark, wiry hair, hyperactive in motion—and walked toward the elevators. The polished doors of the center elevator had just parted and begun to swallow the waiting cluster of upward travelers. Harry's heart did a flip when he saw that unique hairdo directly in front of him.

Once in the elevator car Harry managed to plant himself next to his Elsa. He could hardly believe his good fortune, and he wondered if he could be so lucky that she would also be going to Gordon, Heggie, Walton, and Frye. He was painfully conscious of her beside him, her elbow occasionally brushing lightly against his with the sway of the car. He breathed deeply, smelling—or imagining he could smell—scented soap, perhaps powder, and subtle flowerlike perfume.

Harry was so conscious of her proximity that he feared his nervousness would show. He thrust his hands deep in his pockets, momentarily studying the floor between the toes of his unpolished shoes. Then with a burst of nerve he looked up toward her and smiled and said, "Really nice day, ain't it?"

The finely molded chin jerked in his direction and the round eyes took him in briefly. She said nothing. Harry's heart sank from the chill of her look. But his hopes were renewed in an instant when the elevator stopped at fifteen and she got off. It looked as though she worked at Gordon, Heggie, Walton, and Frye, so Harry might have a whole week to work his charm on her.

"This is one hell of a load of copying. It's going to take at least a week, barring machine breakdowns. We agreed to have it done, but we're not wild about it even though someone else is paying for it. Technically you two are working for the opposition."

"Opposition?" Harry said. "Opposition to what?"

"Let me explain a little," said Basil O'Connor, the office manager and their contact for the job. "There were a couple of lawsuits filed

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not long after Mr. Gordon's death, and as part of one of them, really the only one that matters, we were served with—"

Harry interjected, "Gordon's dead? Now this is just Heggie, Walton, and whatever?"

O'Connor scowled. "No, no, the name's still the same, and I guess the firm's still the same, at least until all this legal stuff gets ironed out. I was trying to say, we were served with a *notice to produce,* a legal order calling for us to turn over records—in this case, lots and lots of records of many kinds—to the plaintiff's attorneys. We're not about to let our business records leave the premises, so everything they want has to be copied. And this week that's your job."

Harry asked, "Who's suing who?"

O'Connor's scowl remained in place. "If it matters," he grumbled, "the late Mr. Gordon's estate is suing the company. It seems the partnership agreements were outdated and full of holes, and there's considerable controversy as to who owns the substantial art collection gracing the late Mr. Gordon's office and the boardroom."

He made a motion of dismissal with the fingers of both hands and said, "Enough. All you need to know is where the copier is, and it's right there, and the paper is in those boxes over there, and the material you're to copy is being stacked over there." He nodded toward a new-looking automatic-feed copier, then his pointing finger swept first to the right toward the paper supply and then to the extreme left where the boxes of incoming copying were already stacked four-high. Between these boxes and the machine sat a trash can and a blue recycle box bearing a sign in bold black letters on a white background: WHITE PAPER ONLY.

"Easy enough," said Harry.

"You may be given some special stuff, some odds and ends that have to go through right away. You'll get these from Miss Hobson, that's Lisa Hobson, and she's also the one to ask if you have any questions or if there's any trouble with the copier."

"Yessir," said Dink. "Where do we find Miss Hobson?"

"Her desk is right through there." O'Connor pointed to the middle of three doors opening off the far end of the general office. "You ought to meet her, anyway. Just a second."

O'Connor walked to the open office, stuck his head in and said something Harry and Dink couldn't hear, and started back toward them. Harry's heart leaped when he saw the woman following O'Connor. Lisa Hobson was his Elsa.

O'Connor said, "Lisa, this is—uh, these gentlemen are here to do the copying—uh . . ." He pulled a slip of notepaper from his shirt pocket and said, "This is Mr. Belmont and Mr. Martin, from the temp agency."

The expressionless Miss Hobson said, "Which is which?"

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Harry piped, "I'm Belmont, Harry Belmont."

Did a shade of distaste quickly cross her lips? *No matter,* thought Harry, *I've got one whole week to get to know her. For her to get to know me.*

It took Lisa Hobson only a few minutes to get Harry and Dink started on the copying. Dink, at the input end of the copier, removed documents from the file boxes, removed staples and paperclips, and kept sheets flowing through the machine's automatic feed. Harry, at the output end of the machine, reclipped or stapled anything that needed it, stacked the copies in document boxes, and kept the machine supplied with blank paper.

Later in the morning Basil O'Connor sought out Lisa Hobson and asked, "Are the temps doing okay? I want this stuff done and gone as quickly as possible."

"The younger one, the big guy, he's all right. In fact, he's really good. Plants himself at the machine and doesn't stop. The other one, Belmont, I don't know about him."

"How so?"

"He works in spurts, seems easily bored. Takes a lot of breaks and lets his stuff pile up. And he *reads.*"

"Reads what?"

"Reads what's coming off the copier." Lisa Hobson's tone registered her disapproval. "He's about as nosy as they come. It looks like sometimes he lets the copies pile up while he reads a whole page of—whatever he's looking at."

O'Connor frowned and said, "I've been told we should keep an eye on him, especially around the women in the office and any gambling that might be going on—you know, football, baseball pools, any kind of betting. Fancies himself some kind of ladies' man and high roller, sounds like."

"Where'd you learn this?"

"From Sandra at the temp agency."

"If he's such a dud why do they send him out?"

O'Connor nodded toward Harry and Dink on the other side of the office, at the moment both working, their backs toward the observers. "Because they come as a package. Best buddies, apparently. Everyone wants the big guy because he cranks out more work than any two other temps. But Martin won't work without Belmont, and Belmont is only about half a worker with all his screwing around."

O'Connor sighed. "Anyway, the two together get the job done, so I'm told."

Lisa watched Dink intently for a moment. "Look at him, doesn't miss a beat. Fastest and smoothest I've ever seen on a copier. But

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God! What a dull job doing that all day. Either he's not very bright or he knows how to park his mind in neutral for hours at a time."

"I'd opt for your first choice," O'Connor said drily.

The rest of Monday passed uneventfully, broken up only by lunch, which Harry and Dink purchased from a sidewalk hot-dog vendor and consumed on a bench in a small parklike area next to the bank building.

Tuesday morning Harry found reason to hang around outdoors in front of the building for more than ten minutes, entering only when it became plain that further delay would mean being late for the job. He discovered upon arriving at the fifteenth floor that the vision he hoped to experience again was already at work.

Harry, of course, was already bored sick with the routine they were expected to perform. That Dink did perform admirably. Harry frequently let his end of the process pile up until Dink had to call him out of the men's room or track him down somewhere else in the offices of Gordon, Heggie, Walton, and Frye. It seemed to Dink that Harry, if not engrossed in the racing form, girlie magazine, or wrestling magazine he brought to work in his oh-so-professional-looking spring-top folio, was trying to find out more about Lisa Hobson through conversation with other office workers.

It was only when Harry learned Wednesday morning, through Dink, that Lisa Hobson had been at the copier three or four times Tuesday while he, Harry, was wandering, that he became interested in staying on the job. Or at least near the job, if not actually working.

"Yeah? What's she want when she comes out here? She ask where I was?"

"Didn't ask about anybody. Just gave me special short little copying jobs to do in-between this big stuff. Things for the auditor working in the big office."

"The big office? Where the dead Mr. Gordon used to hang?"

"Guess so." After a brief pause, "Hey, Harry, what's an auditor?"

"Ahh, it's—well, it's a guy who—audits, I guess. Some kind of checking up on people. Something with numbers, like a bookkeeper."

"Oh."

A new voice came from behind them, gravelly, as if the speaker had something caught in his throat. "Hey, guys, I need five copies of this two-pager. Now."

Harry and Dink both turned to face a nondescript man of some forty years, slightly overweight, with a smooth, cherubic face. Wordlessly Dink reached for the paper the man held out, but

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Harry stopped Dink's hand in mid flight and said, "Yeah? And we need to bust into an important job for you? Who're you, anyway?"

The cherubic face scowled at Harry. "I'm Henry Frye, *Mister* Frye to you, and I want these copies now."

Harry's eyebrows climbed a quarter-inch. "Oh? Frye, of—?"

"Gordon, Heggie, Walton, and Frye, yes, now make me the damned copies!"

The job took Dink perhaps thirty seconds, after which the still-scowling Henry Frye stalked off in the direction of Lisa Hobson's office. Upon seeing the man and his bald spot from the back, Harry realized that Mr. Frye was the man Lisa Hobson had entered the building with Monday morning.

Dink worked in silence for a moment or two, then said, "Harry, I think maybe sometimes you're a little too quick to talk up."

Harry shook his head. "Too quick? Even *I* know that some days I only open my mouth to change feet."

Frowning, Dink looked at Harry with obvious lack of understanding. He was about to say something when the tap-tap-tap of heels announced the arrival of Lisa Hobson. She held a sheaf of papers out toward Dink and said, "More material the auditor needs right away."

Dink began her copying while Lisa stood waiting, her right foot tapping to the rhythm of the copy machine. Harry was transfixed; he could see only Lisa, not the copies that were coming out crooked and piling up creased and crosswise.

Lisa Hobson looked down at the mess coming from the machine and looked daggers at Harry just as he caught on to what was happening and cleared away the crumpled paper before it could back up and jam the machine. "Let's try again, shall we?" Her tone was far from friendly.

"Ah, sorry," Harry stammered, "sorry, Lisa."

"Miss Hobson to you," she snapped as she gathered up the second set that Dink had already put through. Harry watched her walk toward her office, head high, neck rigid. Barely at the fringe of audibility Harry muttered, "There goes one tough chick."

"What, Harry?"

"Nothing, kid. But I'll see that she warms up by the end of the week if it kills me."

"You always say that, Harry. Whenever Momma heard one of us say that—you know, if it kills me?—she'd say to shut up because sometime it just might."

The remainder of Wednesday was a rush of activity. It was not just because of the nearly nonstop copying—Harry wished that Dink could be made to adopt a more leisurely pace, but he had long ago given up trying to affect the younger man's work style—but also

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because of the number of visitors seeking both copies and information. Lisa Hobson visited them a half-dozen times for immediate copies for "Mr. Pratt, the auditor," presenting what looked like bills, invoices, statements, and ledger pages. Whenever Harry heard the tap-tap-tap of her heels approaching he burrowed into the job in the most conscientious manner he could summon, and each time he was sure to greet her with, "Good afternoon, Miss Hobson," or, "How can we help, Miss Hobson?" After several such trips it seemed to Harry that she had softened toward him a little. At least she no longer scowled when she saw him.

That afternoon they were also visited by Mr. Henry, Mr. Dwight, and Mr. Clive, all department heads, as well as another partner, Mr. Walton. Each brought a small amount of "urgent" copying that seemed of little consequence to Harry but all of which was copied immediately and without question by Dink. And each visitor had, in one form or another, asked the same question of Harry and Dink. As put by Mr. Clive: "I know you fellows have been running copies for Mr. Pratt, the auditor. Any idea when he'll be sending out his preliminary report?"

Lisa Hobson overheard partner Walton asking much the same question when she arrived with more immediate copying. She responded with, "Mr. Pratt says his preliminary report, at least the numbers and some rough notes, should be finished Friday morning. He's requested a special meeting of the board of directors and the firm's legal counsel at three that afternoon, so there will probably be a fair amount of rush copying before the meeting."

At the end of the day Lisa Hobson stopped by the copier as Harry and Dink were cleaning up the area. Dark eyelashes batting over round eyes and smiling as though she meant it, she said, "You boys did a great job today in spite of all the interruptions and confusion. Thanks."

Dink smiled and nodded. Harry said, "Thanks, Li—Miss Hobson. We aim to please."

"I shouldn't be so stuffy. It's Lisa, okay?"

Harry and Dink chorused, "Okay."

She squared the strap of her bag over her shoulder and started toward the door. "Goodnight, boys, see you tomorrow."

Harry said, "Goodnight, Elsa." The name was barely out of his mouth when his insides turned to ice and his legs went rubbery.

Lisa stopped in her tracks, turned, and regarded Harry with curiosity. "It's Lisa, Harry, not Elsa, okay?"

"Ah, yeah, sure, I—I just—I don't know what—I got mixed up—" Harry found, to his relief, that he was stammering at her departing back. He could feel the heat rising in his neck and face. He felt as if he'd just been caught in public in his underwear.

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If anything, Thursday was busier than Wednesday had been. Lisa Hobson made twice her usual number of visits for quick copies for Mr. Pratt. Department heads Henry, Dwight, and Clive and partners Walton and Frye made multiple visits, at times even arriving in pairs. At one point Clive and Frye approached together, each with two or three sheets of copying in hand, Frye wearing his usual frown and Clive talking animatedly, "—and we all know damn well it's more than a routine audit. It's more like an investigation, like they're out to get someone."

At one otherwise quiet moment—meaning no more than a single visitor present, the soft-spoken department head Mr. Dwight—Harry and Dink were presented with a proposition. At a moment when Harry and Dink were just a couple of feet apart, Mr. Dwight stepped up between them, placed a hand lightly on the shoulder of each, and said conspiratorially, "I'm not invited to tomorrow's board meeting but I have a need to know what's going on. If by chance you get to copy the auditor's preliminary report, there's fifty bucks in it for you if you can make an extra copy. For me."

Dink paused in his work and looked straight ahead. Harry opened his mouth to speak but was cut short by the now familiar tap-tap-tap of Lisa Hobson's heels. Dwight's hands slid from their shoulders and as he withdrew he said softly, "See what you can do for me, boys."

"More special copying for Mr. Dwight?" Lisa asked a moment later.

"Naw," said Harry, "actually, he stopped to tell us what a good job we're doing." Out of the corner of his eye Harry saw Dink's posture turn rigid.

After Lisa had departed, Dink said quietly, "Harry, don't touch it. It's trouble."

"Aw, what's the harm? One extra copy of a few pages and we're fifty bucks richer. Fifty nontaxable bucks."

"I don't like it, Harry."

"Hey, kid, loosen up. Everything that this auditor guy wants copied comes to us in Elsa's—ah, Lisa's hands." *Damn, did it again.*

Harry ignored Dink's puzzled look and continued, "Anything she gives you, just quietly hit the 2 for number of copies and touch this button for the collator trays. This thing makes two copies nearly as fast as one."

"Won't she hear the collator? It kind of clacks when it goes up and down."

"Don't worry about the noise, leave that to me."

The next time Miss Hobson brought papers from the auditor the package consisted of just five sheets. Dink loaded them in the

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automatic feeder, and with his body between her and the panel he reset the controls and hit the Start button.

As the collator rack was about to shift Harry said, "Really nice day, ain't it? Too bad we got to be inside." The few seconds of innocent conversation that followed effectively covered up the minor sounds of the collator, and as long as Lisa stayed to Harry's left—where so far she had always stood when she came to the copier—she couldn't see the collator rack moving beneath the main discharge tray.

The three or four more times that day when they were given more copying for Mr. Pratt they managed to quietly make extra copies. Harry felt proud of himself because his scheme was working; he was inclined to overlook the fact that it was Dink's sleight-of-hand enabling the activity while Harry had only to gaze at Lisa Hobson and make polite conversation.

Harry could already feel the extra fifty in his hand as the end of Thursday approached and he had accumulated a stack of fifteen or so pages of copying done for the auditor. He was ready with the copies in an unlabeled file folder when Mr. Dwight strolled up to them and asked softly, "Got anything for me, boys?"

Looking sharply to his left and then to his right, Harry quickly passed the file folder to the other man as though he were handing off state secrets. Mr. Dwight flipped through the copies and said, "None of this is what I need. This stuff's just source documents he's copying for the audit file."

"Hey," said Harry, his voice rising as he mentally watched the fifty dollars float away, "you said copying for the auditor, and this is copying for the auditor."

"The wrong copying. Obviously he hasn't finished his rough draft yet. It should be coming out tomorrow morning, and lots of it's going to be on this kind of paper." Dwight reached past Dink to some documents awaiting copying and displayed for them a sheet of columnar accounting paper, light green with numerous columns and lined spaces. "The fifty-dollar offer still holds. I'll check with you about midmorning tomorrow."

"Yeah, sure," muttered Harry toward Mr. Dwight's departing back.

"I tell you, Harry," said Dink, "we should forget about it. There's some funny stuff going on around here."

Harry said nothing.

Friday morning the activity in the office approached the frantic. It was apparent that a number of people, mostly the managers and partners, were uptight about the impending auditor's report and afternoon board meeting. And as Harry and Dink also learned, it was the firm's practice to close the office at 3:00 Friday afternoon

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if business was reasonably caught up, so most staff, at least those who weren't managers, were eager to get the day's work out of the way.

On Lisa Hobson's first visit to the copier that morning she seemed worried and distant, even uptight, agitated, as if she might throw something on the slightest provocation. She muttered, "Good morning, gentlemen," as though she didn't care whether it was good or not.

Lisa held several sheets of paper out toward Dink, what looked like standard white paper covered with double-spaced lines of type with a few lines here and there emphasized with blue highlighter. She said, "I need this copied instantly for Mr. Pratt and our legal counsel. It's an inventory of all the art pieces Mr. Gordon accumulated, and I've had to mark for the lawyer the ones of exceptional value. A lot of the fuss is about who owns this stuff, Mr. Gordon's estate or the company."

She tapped her foot nervously and said, "Come on, let's get going. Two copies, stapled."

Dink fed the sheets into the machine. Lisa already had her hand out for the copies as they rolled out. Harry matched up the first set and stapled a corner. Lisa reached out and plucked it from his fingers and turned and walked away.

Dink turned and began, "Hey, miss, you—"

"Quiet, kid," Harry whispered hoarsely. "Here, quick, make a copy of this copy. This might be part of our extra fifty bucks."

Dink did so. The tap-tap-tap of Lisa's heels hadn't faded completely away before it began to increase again. As she came up behind Harry and Dink she said, "My other copy. I walked off without it."

Harry was all smiles as he stapled a corner and handed the sheets to Lisa. "Here you are, Elsa, I was just going to bring it to you."

It had come so easily that Harry was unsure if he had actually used the wrong name. For just a second or two he thought with alarm: *Did I do it again?*

With widened eyes, chin jerking birdlike toward him, looking all the more like his fantasy woman, Lisa Hobson snapped, "Harry—Mr. Belmont—*why* do you insist on calling me Elsa?"

"Uh—I—just similar names, I guess," Harry stammered. "Ah—got a cousin named Elsa." Even Harry Belmont was bright enough to know that no reasonable woman would look favorably on being compared with an actress portraying the Bride of Frankenstein. Fortunately for Harry, Lisa pivoted and rapidly tap-tapped toward her office, head held high and beehive hairdo looking for all the world as though it would pull her over backwards.

Dink said softly, "Harry, you really got a problem with her name."

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"Shut up, kid," Harry muttered.

The Friday morning pace picked up; for a while one might have described the place—charitably at that—as a zoo. Harry and Dink were nearing the bottom of the pre-boxed documents they had to copy, but the interruptions were coming fast and furious. Lisa Hobson, her sour mood unimproved, made another three or four trips for the auditor. Each partner and most of the department heads found reason to stop by the copier, several asking whether the auditor's preliminary conclusions had been sent out for copying. As partner Walton justified his request, "There's an important board meeting at three and I need to be prepared to intelligently discuss the report. We should all really be given an advance copy, or maybe the meeting should have been set for next week."

Twice Mr. Dwight inquired about the report and reminded Harry of the fifty-dollar offer. Once, when department heads Henry and Clive stood by with inconsequential copying in their hands, Frye came puffing from the direction of the executive offices with a four- or five-inch stack of paper in his hands. He dropped the stack in the recycle bin and as the paper landed with a *whoomp!* he muttered, "There's more useless crap around here and it's about time we started pitching it."

Activity became so lively that even Dink seemed marginally disturbed, because his natural workflow was so frequently interrupted. Harry, for one, was never happier than when noon arrived and they could escape the building for an hour for lunch.

When they returned at one P.M. Harry went to the wall-mounted coatrack and reached up toward the shelf over the rack. "Hey, Dink," he said, "you seen my folio? I was sure I put it up here and—"

"Is that it?" Dink pointed at the black spring-top folio, filled to bulging, lying on top of a nearby stack of boxes of copy paper.

"Yeah. Funny, I don't remember taking it down." Harry picked up the folio and slid his thumb into the spring-loaded top, but before he could open it Lisa Hobson's voice called, "Di—ah, Mr. Martin!" She hurried into their presence. "We need your help. Our stock person didn't come in today, and we have a whole shipment of copy paper on the freight elevator, and naturally the delivery driver won't bring it any farther. Would you mind terribly helping to move it to the stockroom?"

"Sure thing," said Dink. He switched the copier to Standby.

Lisa said, "Just tell Danielle at the reception desk that I sent you to help with the paper."

"Okay."

Harry, who avoided physical labor at all costs, didn't volunteer

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to help. He was again about to spread open his folio when Lisa Hobson said to Harry, "You come with me, please, I need your help with something else."

Lisa turned immediately and strode toward the executive offices. Harry laid the folio down and followed. He caught up with Lisa as she was unlocking the door to what Harry knew to be the late Mr. Gordon's office. It never occurred to him to wonder why the door had been locked, but as though she read his mind Lisa said, "There's a bunch of valuable stuff in here and we don't dare leave this office open and unattended for a minute."

The interior was a dramatic eye-opener for Harry. The spacious office looked more like a museum gallery. The furniture was expensive, every piece polished to a high gloss, all of it clustered in an approximate square in the center of the room. The walls held paintings large and small and there were numerous shelves and glass-fronted cabinets filled with objects that looked to Harry like pieces of art both old and modern from countries around the world. There were vases, bowls, figurines, candlesticks, and dozens of implements Harry couldn't identify. Beneath every exhibited piece there was a small white card bearing a number and a title of one or two words.

Through a half-open connecting door Harry could see that what was apparently the boardroom was furnished in the same manner. The territory of the late Mr. Gordon, the firm's founder and senior partner, was both upscale executive suite and private art museum.

"We're in a hurry, Mr. Belmont. Mr. Pratt will be back from lunch momentarily and I need to get some material unpacked for him to look at quickly."

Harry said, "I never saw this Mr. Pratt. How's he get in and out of here?"

Lisa pointed to a door in the far back corner. "Mr. Gordon's private entrance. Back stairwell and private elevator. Mr. Gordon owns—owned—controlling interest in this building, you know."

Harry didn't know. Lisa said, "There's a stack of boxes in the boardroom. They're sealed with strapping tape. I've got to get them up on the table and opened, but they're too bulky for me and I can't get the tape loose."

"I'm your man, let's do it." He started toward the boardroom door. In Lisa's presence he had apparently forgotten his aversion to physical labor.

"Here, use this on the tape." Lisa held out a gold-plated letter opener, passing it handle-first to Harry.

Harry stepped past the half-open door to the boardroom. The room was about the same area as the office but more rectangular than square. At the far end was another door, closed. Again the furniture looked expensive, and again the walls were lined with Mr. Gordon's treasures. Half of the surface of the elegant confer-

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ence table was strewn with documents, as though someone had walked off (for lunch?) in the middle of a project.

"Where's these boxes?" Harry grasped the letter opener.

"On the floor around the back side of the table."

Harry stepped away from the door, and in the duration of just a second or so several images and sensations assailed his senses: the rustle of something from behind the door, now to his rear; something on the floor alongside the conference table, a pair of miniature dirty gray tombstones canted slightly away from each other—the soles of a pair of shoes?; and a sudden sharp pain above his right ear as orange, red, and purple crowded in on his vision like a camera shutter closing and everything faded to black.

"What in hell have you gotten yourself into, Belmont?" The speaker was Sergeant Franklin Conners of the Metropolitan Police. He was middle-aged, comfortably padded, possessed of what's been called a kewpie-doll shape, and had thin sandy hair. Conners looked at the seated, glumly downcast Harry, then up at the still-standing Dink and said, "Martin, can't you keep better track of him?" Dink didn't respond.

They were in the general office near the copy machine: Sergeant Conners, with two uniforms standing quietly by, Harry and Dink, Lisa Hobson, and a sizable contingent of managers and executives including Dwight, Clive, O'Connor, Frye, Walton, and a couple of others. The general office staff had been herded up to a sixteenth-floor conference room for questioning by two officers. Several chairs had been commandeered but at the moment Harry was the only party seated.

"Tell me again, Harry," said the sergeant.

Harry went through his story a second time. Again, at the expected points in his narrative, Lisa Hobson screeched, "He's lying! He's lying!" this time adding, "I think he's been stealing from Mr. Gordon's collection and this time poor Mr. Pratt walked in on him."

"Not like you, Harry," said Sergeant Conners. "Lift a few baubles here and there, run a short con or two, yes, but not violence. Not the Harry Belmont I know so well. Unless—unless, maybe, Harry, you panicked? Struck out without thinking?"

"No! And how do you explain the knot on the side of my head?"

Basil O'Connor said, "Could have happened in the struggle with Pratt."

Someone else said, "But *twice!* Why stab twice? The first was obviously the one that killed him."

"To leave the letter opener there with my prints all over it," Harry moaned. "I told you, I've been set up!"

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Someone else said, "Why don't we see if anything's missing from Mr. Gordon's collection?"

"There's a lot of stuff to go through and match with the inventory," said Mr. Dwight. "Why not just search him? Search his jacket or whatever else he's got."

Harry glanced in the direction of his barely visible folio. Sergeant Conners followed the glance, saw what Harry was looking at, and said, "First place to check. Harry, can we see what's in your case?"

"No. Yes. Oh hell, I'm afraid to look."

Sergeant Conners retrieved the folio and in the presence of the others spread its top. He pulled out a racing form and laid it on a nearby desktop, followed by two wrestling publications. Next came a girlie magazine of a fairly hard-core variety. O'Connor looked at Harry with raised eyebrows and said, "Really, Belmont!"

Last out of the folio were two packages of less-than-magazine dimensions but thicker. Both were crudely wrapped in white copy paper. The sergeant laid the packages on the desktop and with the eraser end of a pencil began to lift away the folded paper. A voice in the small crowd said, "Why so cautious? Afraid it's a bomb?"

Another answered, "Fingerprints. Like on the weapon, probably."

The policeman's unwrapping efforts revealed two objects, a flat carving about five by seven inches of a pair of intertwined dragons in what appeared to be solid jade, and an ornate antique gold cigar case. The small crowd pressed in to look. There was a sharp intake of breath and Lisa Hobson said, "My God, he took two of the most valuable pieces!"

From the fringe of the group came the voice of Mr. Frye: "It all seems remarkably clear. This little—thief—lifted the two pieces and went back for more and poor Mr. Pratt had the ill fortune to walk in on him."

Harry implored, "How could I do that? With that fancy office locked up all the time?"

Mr. Clive said, "The executive office is never locked during the day. Only at night and on weekends."

Harry glared at Lisa Hobson. Averting his gaze, with an edge of hysteria in her voice she said, "He knew enough to go right to the most valuable pieces!"

Harry said, "Aw, come on, lady, I wouldn't know what the valuable stuff was out of all that junk. This is part of the setup! That stuff was planted in my case while I was at lunch." He tried to lock onto her gaze but she wouldn't look directly at him. "You set me up, all the way—*Elsa!*" The name was deliberately uttered, spat out like a curse.

"He may have a point," said Mr. Clive. "There must be three, four hundred items in there, and Mr. Belmont here doesn't strike me as an art expert."

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"All the exhibits are numbered," Lisa said, "and this—nosy creature—saw which ones were highlighted when I had the inventory copied." Her mouth turned down in disgust and she added, "He's always trying to read what's coming off the copier, and I guess—" her mouth transitioned into a sorrowful pout—"it's partly my fault because I put the inventory right into his hands."

Sergeant Conners, hands clasped over his middle, rocking gently on his heels, looked down at Harry like a teacher pondering the behavior of a pupil who had severely disappointed him. "Well, Harry, what do you have to say to that?"

Looking down toward the floor, Harry said nothing.

"Well, Harry?"

At the rear of the group Mr. Dwight said, "Hell, I helped pick him up off the floor right in front of the body, so enough of this jerking around. Take him away and lock him up."

The sergeant looked up at the speaker and said softly, "You wouldn't be trying to tell the police how to do their job, would you?"

"Why, no, I just thought . . ." Dwight's voice trailed off without saying what he thought.

There was a moment's silence in which it seemed everyone in the group except Lisa Hobson was looking at Harry. Harry was now staring daggers at Lisa but it did no good because she steadfastly refused to meet his gaze.

Finally Sergeant Conners repeated, "Well, Harry?"

"Harry couldn't have seen no highlighted stuff." Several people looked at each other before settling on the source of the remark—the heretofore silent Dink Martin.

"Nonsense," someone said.

"Rubbish," said Lisa Hobson, glaring at Dink. "You sent the list through the copier and right into his hands."

Brow furrowed, the large youth said, "Blue highlighter don't copy. All the other highlighters—I seen green, pink, yellow, even some kind of crazy orange—show a muddy gray streak when they go through the copier. But blue don't copy."

Basil O'Connor said, "He's right, most blues don't copy. That's why the layout people in the advertising department always use light blue pencil for guidelines."

Speaking up for the first time, Mr. Walton asked, "Then how did he know which pieces to take?"

Lisa Hobson sneered and said, "Obviously the big dummy here—" Dink stiffened but his expression didn't change—"gave Belmont the numbers. *He* saw the blue because he fed it into the copier."

Focusing on Lisa, Dink said, "All I saw was typing and some blue in places. I didn't know what it was, even though you were trying to tell us it was about valuable stuff."

"Tell you?" It was Sergeant Conners.

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Harry said, "Yeah, she went all out to tell us this was all valuable sh—ah, stuff—even to the best ones being marked."

Conners asked, "True, Miss Hobson?"

"Of course not." Scornfully.

Unseen by some of the group, a woman and a man had approached quietly. The former, a tall, stern-looking woman who might easily have been a jail matron or army sergeant, beckoned to partner Walton from a few feet away. The man, half a head shorter than his companion and wearing a look that hovered between pain and panic, mirrored her beckoning motions. Walton joined them and both began speaking to him in hushed tones.

Sergeant Conners stopped in the middle of framing another question for Lisa Hobson and frowned at the group of three now disrupting his questioning. "Can I ask who these people are? I thought we'd shipped the rest of the staff upstairs."

The faces of the newcomers clearly said they didn't care to be lumped together with "the rest of the staff." Mr. Walton said, "This is Miss Balderston, executive secretary to the late Mr. Gordon, and Mr. Hurlbut, our legal counsel."

"Then you should probably have been invited to this little party a half-hour ago," Conners said. "But what's so important you had to break in now?"

Wringing his hands and shifting his weight from foot to foot as though in need of a bathroom break, Hurlbut, the lawyer, said, "Something extremely important has disappeared. Dear, dear—extremely important."

"We know," said Mr. Dwight. "What you're referring to is right here on this desk."

In a voice that matched her drill-sergeant appearance, Miss Balderston said, "We're not referring to any of Mr. Gordon's knick-knacks, valuable though some might be. What's needed for this afternoon—or what *was* needed, since I assume the scheduled board meeting will not take place—has vanished. I'm referring to the work sheets and other draft material for Mr. Pratt's audit report."

"And what's so precious about this—ah, report material?" Conners asked.

Miss Balderston and Mr. Hurlbut looked at each other beneath raised brows, then both looked at Sergeant Conners as though each was waiting for the other to speak.

Conners: "Well?"

Hurlbut cleared his throat and began, "Miss Balderston and I have—had—been working with Mr. Pratt on the audit on a nearly daily basis, bringing him confidential material and periodically discussing various issues with him."

Miss Balderston added, "In secret, without the knowledge of any

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of the staff or management, including the surviving partners." A low murmur ran through the group.

Hurlbut continued, "It seems that Mr. Pratt discovered fairly early in the audit that there have been—ah, improprieties of various sorts in the firm's financial matters." The murmur increased in volume and several members of the firm's management hierarchy looked sharply at each other.

"Mostly nothing dreadfully significant," said Miss Balderston. "Some expense-account padding and the like." Was that a group sigh of relief?

"Mostly," Balderston repeated with added emphasis.

Hurlbut explained, "There's one significant item—the apparent embezzlement of an amount in excess of two hundred thousand dollars."

The group murmur became a simultaneous sharp intake of breath by several of those present, followed by a rumble of comments including, "No way!" "Come on, now," "Who're you trying to kid?" and, "Well, *who?* Who did it?"

"Good question," said Sergeant Conners. He looked expectantly at Balderston and Hurlbut. "Who indeed?"

Hurlbut looked warily around the room. He spread his forearms apart, palms up, and shrugged. "Who knows? Two days ago, Wednesday, Mr. Pratt said he was pretty sure he knew but he wanted to make certain. Said he'd know by Friday morning—this morning—and that he might recommend having a couple of police officers here this afternoon."

"The answer should be in the notes Mr. Pratt prepared for the audit report," said Miss Balderston. She looked around the room as though ensuring the maximum possible attention before she added, "But that's part of the missing material."

Quiet settled briefly over the group as those present continued to look accusingly at one another. The silence was broken with: "Sergeant? Sergeant Conners, sir?"

It was Dink Martin who had spoken. Conners said abruptly, "What, Martin? What is it? Can't it wait?"

"Sir, if I can just go get something over near the copier. Maybe it's got something to do with what you want."

"What? Oh, what the hell, go get it," said Conners.

Dink walked toward the copy machine. If he heard someone in the crowd say, "What could *he* possibly know?" he ignored it.

From the trash can near the copier Dink retrieved a packet of paper, perhaps thirty sheets, secured in one corner with a binder clip. As he returned to the group the others could see the familiar green of columnar accounting paper. He handed the packet to Sergeant Conners.

The look on the sergeant's face said he didn't know where to

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begin. Hurlbut spoke up. "May I look that over? I've seen most of it but perhaps the final sheets will tell us something."

"They damn well better," muttered Harry Belmont. All eyes swung momentarily in his direction.

Someone in the group—Harry thought it was Henry Frye—said, "The audit report's beside the point. It still looks like you got your thief and murderer right here." There was a brief murmur of assent.

Hurlbut extracted a pair of half-glasses from a pocket, perched them on his nose, and began flipping through the sheets.

Sergeant Conners said, "Martin, where did you get this stuff?"

"From the recycle bin, Sergeant."

"Why on earth? Why this?"

"The recycle bin says 'White Paper Only' right on it. I saw all this green sticking out in the middle of a whole stack of paper that got dropped in this morning. So I pulled it out and put it in the trash."

The sergeant arched an eyebrow. "Any idea how it got into the recycle bin?"

"Yessir. That gentleman there dropped it in." Dink nodded in the direction of Henry Frye.

Lisa Hobson said, "What utter nonsense!"

The sergeant simply said, "Mr. Frye?"

Righteous indignation in his every move and every word, Frye responded, "All I did was discard—recycle, I mean—a stack of paper we've been tripping over for weeks. I haven't the faintest idea how those green sheets got in there." He swung an accusing finger first in Dink's direction, then aimed it at Harry. "This big ox here is just trying to pull our attention away from his thieving, murdering little buddy here, and they should *both* be arrested. *Now!*"

Sergeant Conners began, "Look, Mr. Frye, we—"

Hurlbut interrupted with, "Sergeant! Sergeant, we have something here in poor Mr. Pratt's notes. It seems Mr. Pratt was absolutely convinced that—" Hurlbut paused. Every eye in the room focused on him. "—the embezzler is the individual who negotiated and signed the Thesiger and Ernest contract the year before last."

"Now who was that?" asked Mr. Dwight. "Damn, was it Heggie?"

"No," said Mr. Walton, "but for a customer as big as T & E it would have to have been a partner. It was, in fact, Henry Frye."

Frye yelled, "That's crazy!"

Harry stood up and glared at Henry Frye. "Damn, this turkey killed that poor auditor before the guy could turn him in." He whirled on Lisa Hobson. "And this broad's part of it, probably his girlfriend or something. She put the letter opener in my hand just before I got slugged."

Lisa blurted, "You nosy, creepy little man, you don't know what the hell you're saying."

Henry Frye suddenly turned on his heels and sprinted toward the

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door. Or tried to sprint; given his breadth and apparent physical condition he didn't manage much more than a rapid waddle. Before he reached the door, however, it swung wide and the opening was filled with a very large uniformed officer who smiled, clamped a hand about Frye's forearm, and escorted him back to the group.

Sergeant Conners said, "We're going to break up this little gathering. Mr. Frye, Miss Hobson, let's have a little chat in one of the private offices." Frye looked about helplessly as two uniformed officers fell in one on each side of him.

With an expression of panic Frye looked left and right in turn at his captors. Round-eyed, he addressed Sergeant Conners: "It wasn't me, I didn't hurt anyone." Bobbing his chin toward Lisa Hobson, he rattled on, "It was this—this witch, this money-hungry witch, she suckered me with—with promises, with—"

Lisa shrieked, "Liar! I wasn't the one who panicked when Pratt walked in. I wasn't the—"

Conners interrupted, "Save it, at least until after I read you your rights. Then you can accuse each other as much as you'd like."

Seeming to bring herself rapidly under control, Lisa Hobson said, "Fat chance. I'm saying nothing else."

As the group broke up and Hobson and Frye were led toward an open office Sergeant Conners said, "Belmont, Martin, I'd like you to wait here for a little while." His tone said they damn well better wait.

Left to themselves in the center of the general office, Harry and Dink pulled up a couple of chairs. Actually, Dink pulled up a chair and immediately sat but Harry tried four different padded swivel chairs before finding one he was satisfied with.

When the small group exited the private office nearly an hour later, Hobson and Frye wore the same expressions as when they had entered—Hobson defiant and Frye distressed. The only difference was that they came out of the office in handcuffs.

As the uniforms escorted Lisa Hobson and Henry Frye toward Harry and Dink, Harry felt a pang of disappointment. But the feeling passed as the woman who so resembled his secret love glared at him. He returned the glare with a broad smile, and in response she uttered a low sound, half hiss, half throaty growl, that again reminded him so much of the woman on the silver screen.

As she passed by him Harry said, " 'Bye, Elsa."

"Lisa, damnit, the name is *Lisa!*"

"No, it ain't," said Harry, "you just *think* it is. Your name is Elsa and you're some kind of monster, that's what you are." And in Harry's mind she would forever be just that. ●

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Art by June Levine

LITTLE MISS MUFFET

by Marianne Strong

For the fifth time that morning, six-year-old Jenny Derrick stood by the window of her bedroom, stared at the great white Victorian house next-door, and intoned the rhyme:

"Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet,
Eating her curds and whey;
Along came a spider and sat down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffet away."

Her mother Carol shook her head, sighed, then ran downstairs to answer the doorbell.

It was Emma. "Good morning, Mrs. Derrick," the housemaid said, stepping inside and peering up the stairs to the second floor. "Jenny still confined to the upstairs?"

Carol nodded. "Yes, she is, Emma. At least, for the most part. The doctor says she can come down the stairs once or twice a day, but her lungs still need more time to strengthen."

Emma shrugged her large shoulders out of her woolly red jacket. "Damn asthma. Keeping that little girl up there for weeks. But I guess it's for her own good."

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Carol cast an eye up the stairs. "I know. But when you bring her down today, Emma, keep her down as long as possible."

"I'll read her favorite book to her."

"No. Don't read the Mother Goose rhymes."

Emma lifted both eyebrows.

"Jenny's becoming obsessed with those rhymes," Carol said. "Today she told me that Little Miss Muffet lives in that damn house next-door and that early this morning a spider came to scare her."

Emma followed Carol to the kitchen, chuckling. "Mrs. Derrick, I know just how Jenny feels. You've got a human-size house here, but that big old place next-door looks like it could be full of spiders. You know, with those gauzy gray curtains on the big windows, that rickety porch, and that thing on the roof. What do you call it?"

"A cupola," Carol said. "I should have moved out of this old neighborhood when my ex left us." She gulped the last of her coffee and stuffed papers into her briefcase. "In the future, I'll require any client interested in buying a Victorian house to take a psychiatric test." She grimaced. "I should have taken one when I agreed to move here."

Emma dropped a third sugar cube into her own coffee. "Show your clients those nice new condos down by the harbor. I understand they got hot tubs the size of a flatbed."

"Sounds great to me," Carol said. "But half of Baltimore is obsessed with the nineteenth century. Edgar Allan Poe and all that. Even named their football team the Ravens. Sometimes I think this city's haunted by Poe and his child bride. Only fourteen, she was. And living with that man and his mother. What a family."

Emma patted Carol's shoulder. "Easy does it, Mrs. Derrick. Jenny's reading Mother Goose, not Poe."

"Mother Goose no doubt inspired Poe," Carol said, snapping shut her briefcase. "Blind mice getting their tails cut off; blackbirds baked in a pie; spiders scaring little girls."

"Well," Emma said, "any spidery-looking people live next-door?"

"No," Carol said. "Mrs. Welling's daughter Joan looks more like a mouse than a spider."

"What's the mother look like?"

Carol stopped digging in her purse for her car keys and looked

Short story writer Marianne Strong once told *EQMM* that she usually draws the inspiration for her mysteries from two sources: Greek and Roman mythology, which is a lifelong love and the subject she teaches, and her hometown of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. This time out, however, she clearly called upon memories of the nursery rhymes nearly every child grows up with—and is often frightened by. Ms. Strong lives and teaches in Maryland. †

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at Emma. "You know, Emma, she does look like an elderly Miss Muffet might look: curly blue-grey hair and flowered dresses with little lace collars."

"Well then, there you are," Emma said. "Maybe Jenny just did see something. Anybody at all in the neighborhood look like a spider?"

"Come to think of it, my ex always thought that Mrs. Welling's stepdaughter looked like a spider." Carol glanced up the stairs again. "Do you suppose . . ." She stopped.

"Why don't we just ask Mrs. Welling if her stepdaughter came to visit?"

Carol frowned. "I haven't seen Mrs. Welling out for a few weeks. I assume she's sick." She lifted a hand, then dropped it. "I've felt a little bad not checking on her, but she has her daughter, and with Jenny sick and her father too damn busy to visit . . ." Carol shrugged.

"Hmm," Emma mumbled. "The mother's sick, eh? I wonder if the daughter needs some help."

Carol shuddered. "Oh God, Emma. The neighbors all say she has plenty of money to hire help, but you wouldn't leave me now, would you?"

"No, no," Emma reassured her employer. "I don't fancy cleaning hundred-year-old dust off all that curlicue Victorian furniture. Besides, I couldn't leave Jenny."

Carol said a silent prayer of thanks to whatever saint was in charge of harried single mothers. "Bless you," she said aloud. "As a matter of fact, Emma, I was going to ask if you could sit Jenny for a few hours Saturday if my clients and I need to meet with the mortgage people."

"Sure," Emma said. "My son doesn't have little Bobby this weekend and those marriage countering groups are meeting in the church auditorium on Saturday. So no bingo." Emma squinted. "Or is it marriage encounter groups?"

"Counter, encounter. Depends, I guess." Carol glanced at the hall clock. "I'd better get a move on."

A lilting child's voice floated down the stairs:

> "Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet
> Eating her curds and whey;
> Along came a spider, a spider, a spider . . ."

Carol shook her head. "Emma, I'm really worried about Jenny. I hope the fever hasn't affected her mind. The doctor told me it wouldn't, but . . ." She cut off that thought and glanced at her watch. She had fifteen minutes to meet her clients at the Stevenson house. She had to make this sale. With Paul's child-support payments none too steady, money was tight. She threw her jacket over her shoulders.

Emma followed her to the front door. "Jenny's just got a good

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imagination. Children do, bless them. Little Bobby swears there's a grizzly bear in my kitchen." Emma flexed her muscles. "Probably means me, the little stinker."

"Just the same," Carol said, "call me if you . . . well, if you notice anything that alarms you about Jenny's behavior."

"I will," Emma promised.

Outside, Carol stood for a moment, looking at the Victorian house. She'd bring back a nice story for Jenny to take her mind off it. Maybe "Snow White." No, she said to herself, thinking of the poison apple. Maybe "Cinderella." No, again. No wicked stepmothers. Why were children's books and rhymes so scary?

In her car, Carol turned on the radio, then looked again at the graying Victorian. With a coat of white paint, clean lace curtains, and some wreaths and candles, it could grace a Christmas card. Intimations of happy families. As long as you couldn't see inside.

By noon, Carol managed to get her clients to make an offer. She left the office calculating how many hours she could devote to nailing down the deal without neglecting Jenny. She grimaced. The single mother's ever-present balancing act. Driving home down Loch Raven Road, past the imposing doors of the stone mansions built by the steel and shipping magnates of Baltimore's heyday as an industrial port city, she wondered if maybe the Victorians with their mores against divorce had actually dealt more selflessly with the needs of children. "Damn Paul," she muttered.

In the driveway, she cut off the motor and rolled her head around to loosen her neck muscles.

When she entered the house, she could hear Emma in the kitchen, humming. She took a deep breath, savored the rich buttery smell, and thanked God for Emma. A roasted turkey, she thought. Enough food for four or five days. Emma was worth a thousand Pauls.

"That you, Mrs. Derrick?" Emma called from the kitchen.

"It is." Carol hung up her coat and walked into the kitchen.

Emma, clad in an apron that said "I cook it my way," was cutting up some mushrooms for a salad.

"How was Jenny today?" Carol asked.

"Just fine. She came downstairs twice and we read a few pages of *The Little Mermaid.* Then I took her upstairs again and let her sleep. When I heard her walking about, I went back up." Emma glanced at Carol. "She was reading her Mother Goose book."

"Not 'Little Miss Muffet' again."

"No, she's gone on to another rhyme."

Carol dropped down into a chair. "Oh God, Emma, that's wonderful."

Emma wiped her hands on her apron and sat next to Carol. "But

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you know, Mrs. Derrick, Jenny and your ex were right about the spider."

"You mean Mrs. Welling's stepdaughter? Pauline? You saw her?"

"Well, I don't know who the woman was. But I saw a woman come out of the house next-door, and I'll be darned if she didn't look like a spider. A big spider. She had on a black suit and a red scarf. Looked like a black-widow spider, I swear. To top it all off, she had curly salt-and-pepper hair. Made her look like a spider carrying its nest along." Emma shuddered. "I wouldn't want no run-ins with that woman." She pulled over the salad bowl and plopped in a handful of mushrooms. " 'Less, of course, there was no way to avoid it."

Carol laughed. It felt good. "Emma, if the spider stepdaughter made you angry enough, you'd be down on her like an angry wasp. And you'd win."

"Likely I would," Emma said, flexing her broad shoulders. "But I prefer going round spiders if I can. Anyway, if that was the stepdaughter, she's enough to frighten any Miss Muffet. Know anything about her?"

Carol pulled off her shoes, flexed her toes, and stretched out her arms. "Not much. Pauline and her husband don't come to the house very much. I've seen them at the Globe Bank. They both work there. She's the head teller. Neighbors say that she came to live with Mrs. Welling when she was about fifteen, when Mrs. Welling married her second husband. That was long before Paul and I moved in."

"For a bank teller," Emma said, "the woman drives a mighty nice car. One of those fancy ones. Lexup or Lexal or something. Maybe I ought to think about being a teller."

"Lexus." Carol frowned. "Tellers don't make that much money."

"Well then, so much for that idea," Emma said, tossing the salad vigorously. "I'm better with kids and food than money anyway." She turned toward Carol. "Didn't you say the mama had money? Maybe she bought the car."

"I doubt she parted with any money, at least not voluntarily. She doesn't spend very much. She hasn't air-conditioned the house or fixed the roof or done much of anything else."

"Could be the spider's husband has money," Emma suggested. "He own the bank?"

"No, Edward's an accountant or something. I'm not sure."

A tapping sound began, and Carol looked up at the ceiling. "Jenny's up and playing. I should go up to her."

"You go up," Emma said. "I'll finish making the salad, slice up some turkey for you, and call when it's ready. You can eat and then take Jenny some supper."

Carol threw Emma a kiss. "Emma, will you marry me?"

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"Just go up to Jenny," Emma said, laughing.

Outside Jenny's room, Carol paused and listened to her daughter's high sweet voice:

> "Tweedledum and Tweedledee
> Agreed to fight a battle,
> For Tweedledum said Tweedledee
> Had spoiled his nice new rattle.
> Just then flew by a monstrous crow,
> As black as a tar-barrel,
> Which frightened both the heroes so,
> They quite forgot their quarrel."

After a moment's silence, Jenny began again.

Carol entered the room. "I'm home, darling," she said, and braced as Jenny dashed to her, arms out. They basked for a moment in each other's hugs and kisses.

"Did you sell your house today, Mommy?" Jenny asked.

"Yes," Carol said, "and that means we can get your new bike soon. The doctor says you'll be ready to go out and ride in no time."

Jenny turned and looked out the window at the white house next-door, then turned her grave grey eyes, uncannily adult, on Carol. "I don't want to ride outside," she said.

"Why ever not?" Carol asked, glancing at the Mother Goose book lying on Jenny's bed. "You aren't afraid to see a spider, are you?"

"Oh no," Jenny said. "The spider is gone. The crow chased the spider away."

Carol reached for her daughter's hands and held them firmly. "Jenny, you know that the spider and the crow are just part of the rhymes. They aren't real."

"I'm hungry," Jenny said. "Can I come down for supper, please?"

"I'm afraid you shouldn't, honey. But I'll bring your supper up right away, and then we can talk some more, okay?"

Jenny nodded.

Carol turned to leave, and, at the door, turned again to watch Jenny move to the window.

"Tweedledum and Tweedledee," Jenny intoned, "agreed to fight a battle."

Carol frowned, wondering if she should question Jenny. She hated to encourage the child's fascination with the house next-door lest she make matters worse. Anyway, perhaps Jenny had simply withdrawn into fantasy as a way of dealing with the anger she had witnessed between her parents before her father's departure. Carol decided to get through the weekend and the house sale and then move Jenny into another room. For tonight, she'd have Jenny sleep with her.

Downstairs, she said a reluctant goodbye to Emma, ate her own supper quickly, readied Jenny's, and went back upstairs to her

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daughter. While Jenny ate, Carol watched the house next-door. Through two large windows, she could see part of Mrs. Welling's bedroom. In the dim light glowing through the gauzy curtains, she could just see a lumpy form beneath a quilt. Mrs. Welling, Carol supposed, asleep. Through a large window to the right, Carol could see the second-floor landing. A ceiling light glowed there. She reached up and pulled down the shade on Jenny's window.

By nine, Jenny was asleep in Carol's room. Downstairs, Carol sat at a desk with real-estate papers, a calculator, pencils, and erasers. The house settled into a peaceful quiet.

At midnight, figures blurred before Carol's eyes, and she realized that she'd do better in the morning. She packed up her papers, started upstairs, then remembered that she had to take out the garbage, usually Paul's job.

Outside, she placed the plastic bag on the curb, then turned and looked at the Victorian house. From where she stood, she could see two lights burning: one she'd seen from Jenny's room. Another seemed to drift foglike from a front window. A spider and a crow, Carol thought. Had Jenny indeed seen something? Joan and Pauline arguing? Pauline and Mrs. Welling? The stepsisters? The stepmother and stepdaughter? The Grimms' fairy tales said evil festered in such relationships.

Carol shook herself. She needed a good dose of reality therapy. She went back into her own house without looking again at the house next-door.

But, even with Jenny cuddled warmly beside her, she slept fitfully that night, dreaming of a crow flying about with spiders on its back.

At seven-thirty she awoke, troubled, from a dream that she was running down a long corridor, pursuing a spider carrying Jenny. The spider looked like Paul. She turned her head to see if Jenny was still sleeping.

She was alone in the bed. "Jenny," she called, tugging at the blanket that was wrapped around her legs. "Jenny?" She broke free and ran into Jenny's room.

Jenny had raised the shade on her window. She stood watching the house and reciting another rhyme:

"Hickory, dickory, dock,
The mouse ran up the clock.
The clock struck one,
The mouse ran down,
Hickory, dickory, dock."

She was shaking.

"Jenny," Carol said, rushing to her daughter. Holding Jenny close, she looked out the window into the Victorian house. She could see no one on the landing, but she could hear banging and muffled yells.

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Jenny recited the rhyme again.

"Jenny," Carol said, trying to keep her voice calm. "What did you see?"

Jenny stopped reciting. She clung to Carol.

"Tell me, Jenny," Carol said.

"He chased her up the stairs," Jenny said, her voice muffled against Carol.

"Who chased whom up the stairs, Jenny? Mrs. Welling? Old Mrs. Welling? Did somebody chase her?"

Jenny shook her head. "The mouse ran up the stairs."

Carol held Jenny's face between her hands. "Jenny, the mouse is only in a rhyme."

"But you said she was a mouse. Yesterday, I heard you tell Emma."

"Oh," Carol said. "Joan."

"He chased her up the stairs."

Carol shook her head. "Someone chased Joan?"

"A man. But she's locked in her room now and she's gone. They're all gone."

Carol looked out the window again. She could see no one in the house and no car in the driveway. But she could still hear muffled cries. "Who is locked in her room, Jenny?"

"Mrs. Welling. She's locked in her room because he fell down and broke his crown. Mommy, she threw him down. I saw."

Jenny broke free of her mother and turned to the window. In a high voice, she recited:

> "Goosey, goosey, gander, whither shall I wander?
> Upstairs, downstairs, and in my lady's chamber.
> There I met an old man who would not say his prayers.
> I took him by the left leg and threw him down the stairs."

She turned to Carol. "She threw him down. Then the mouse ran down the stairs. The mouse is gone."

For a moment, Carol wanted only to pull down the shade, to lock the doors, and to pretend that the family and the house next-door did not exist. She heard another cry and decided. "Jenny," she said, "if I go over to help Mrs. Welling, will you stay here alone for just a few minutes? I'll be right back."

Jenny gripped her mother's arm. "Don't go over there, Mommy. The crow will get you."

"Jenny, I'm going to call for some help to come, but I must go over to Mrs. Welling. Then I'll come right back. I have to go now, Jenny. Just stay here. Don't leave the room."

Carol put Jenny in a chair, ran downstairs, called the police, and asked that help be sent to 447 Clemm Road. She gave her own address: 449. She grabbed a raincoat, struggling to get it over her nightgown. Just as she left, she heard Jenny again:

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"Goosey, goosey . . . "

As she dashed across the front lawn, Carol tried to make sense of Jenny's rhymes. Joan and someone had argued. The man must have been Pauline's husband. He was the only man Carol had ever seen at the house. Perhaps Joan had pushed him, or whoever the man was, down the stairs. Then, Joan had locked her mother in her room and left. Jenny said they had all left. Madness, Carol thought. Dangerous madness, but she could not simply sit by and not even try to help a woman who was lonely and perhaps ill. Besides, if Joan had just left, as Jenny said, then she wouldn't return for at least a few minutes.

She half expected to be locked out, but the door to the Victorian house opened with her thrust. She looked back, saw no car coming up the street. If she could get Mrs. Welling out and over to her house before Pauline or Joan or the man came back, the police could handle it from there.

She entered the house, headed for the stairs, then stopped abruptly. "God," she gasped. A body lay crumpled at the foot of the stairs. Carol recognized Pauline's husband. From a gash in his head, blood had seeped out, soaking darkly into the green rug. Carol looked about frantically for a phone to call an ambulance, then remembered that she had to get herself and Mrs. Welling out of the house as soon as possible.

The banging she had heard earlier began again, accompanied by the cries for help.

She ran up the stairs and to the door from which the cries and knocks were still coming. "Mrs. Welling," she called out, "I'll help you." She turned the key that sat in the lock and pushed open the door.

From a backdrop of blue flowered wallpaper, Mrs. Welling stared at Carol.

"Mrs. Welling, I've called the police. Come with me to my house."

Mrs. Welling stood frozen.

"You'll be safe until the police come," Carol urged her, wondering if she could take Mrs. Welling out a back door and avoid the body.

"Is she gone?"

Carol nodded.

"Is he dead?"

"I think so," Carol said, relieved that Mrs. Welling already knew. "But you must . . ." Only then did Carol see the lamp on the floor just to the left of the door. Blood smeared the base. Carol stared into Mrs. Welling's light blue eyes. "My God," she said.

Mrs. Welling looked at the lamp, her eyes wide. "He caused all of it," she said, pointing a long, thin finger toward the stairs. "He told Pauline to take my money and my certificates. And Pauline did it.

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She threatened me and I had to hide in my room."

"My God," Carol mumbled. Little Miss Muffet and the spider, she thought. "Why didn't you tell the police?" she said aloud.

Mrs. Welling threw her hands up. "I was very stupid. I told Joan. Then she wanted money, too." Her gray head shook, but whether from anger or fear Carol could not tell. "My own daughter. She was as greedy as Pauline. The ungrateful child. They quarreled. Joan and Pauline. Joan said she would tell the police if they didn't give her some of the money."

Carol caught her breath. "Yesterday? Did your daughters quarrel yesterday?"

Mrs. Welling nodded. "I was very angry then. I had to shout at them. I told them I would call the police if they didn't stop."

"Then," Carol said, "you are the . . . " She's the crow, Carol thought, the crow who stopped the battle of Tweedledum and Tweedledee. "You stopped them?"

Mrs. Welling rubbed her right hand, pushing the flaccid skin back and forth. "Last night, I told them that I would call the police if they did not bring back my certificates. All of them. But then he came today." She stopped rubbing her hand and glared at Carol. "Fine thieves they all are. Can't even stick together. He didn't want to share the money. And he struck Joan."

The mouse, Carol thought, ran up the clock. "Did he chase her up the stairs?"

Mrs. Welling nodded.

Carol swallowed. "Then it was Joan who . . . " Carol turned and looked at the body at the foot of the stairs. She had to get herself and Mrs. Welling out before Joan returned. "Mrs. Welling," she said. "Where is your daughter now?"

Mrs. Welling plucked at the pink-flowered sleeve on her right arm. "She went to get Pauline. At the bank. She took their car and went."

"We must leave, Mrs. Welling," Carol said.

Mrs. Welling stood immobile.

Carol pulled her by the arm, then pushed gently from behind. As they reached the door, she felt Mrs. Welling jump.

The front door had opened.

Too late, Carol realized. She stared down at Joan and Pauline.

"Christ," Pauline said, slamming the door.

"Oh, my God!" Joan said. "What's she doing here?"

Mrs. Welling backed up into Carol.

"Never mind that," Pauline said. From the bottom of the stairs, she looked up at Carol and Mrs. Welling. "I suppose Mother's told you everything."

Carol moved protectively in front of Mrs. Welling and swallowed. "No, she's told me nothing."

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"Cut the crap," Pauline said. "For days, she's been threatening to tell somebody." She turned to Joan. "We'll have to get rid of the two of them."

"How?" Joan sputtered. "How do we get rid of three bodies?"

"We put them in the cellar. All we need is time to get out of the country. Nobody will miss Mother or Edward. The sap. I told him to stay away from here. Well, now Mother's conveniently gotten rid of him for us."

Carol's mouth fell open. She looked from Joan to Mrs. Welling and back. "Then it wasn't you."

Joan raised shaking hands to her face. "She did it. She hit him with the lamp. He wanted all the money. All of it. He hit me. So Mother . . ."

"Shut up," Pauline said, grabbing Joan's arm. "We take the money, split it, and be rid of each other. If you're as smart as you are greedy, you'll disappear in Europe somewhere."

"But what about her?" Joan said, gesturing up toward Carol. "Somebody will miss her."

"Not in time to matter to us. Her husband's gone. The kid's the only one there and she won't know anything."

Pauline started up the stairs.

Carol and Mrs. Welling backed into the bedroom.

From behind Carol, Mrs. Welling grunted. "The lamp," she said.

Carol looked down at the lamp. In a flash, she bent down, picked it up, and, from the bedroom doorway, flung it at Pauline.

It hit Pauline in the right knee. She crumpled and fell back into Joan just as the front door burst open.

"There's Mommy," Jenny yelled.

Two policemen pushed in, looked at the body, at Carol, at Mrs. Welling, at Pauline and Joan, and then at each other. "What the hell?" one of them said.

"Goosey, goosey," Jenny mumbled, pointing at Mrs. Welling. "She threw him down the stairs." Jenny stared at the body.

"Jenny," Carol yelled. She ran down the stairs, clambering over Pauline and pushing Joan against the railing. She clasped Jenny and looked up at the police. "I'm getting her out of here. You can ask this monstrous family what happened here. I'll be next-door."

She picked Jenny up and walked out. From her own porch, she stole a look at the Victorian. Mother Goose rhymes about cutting off the tails of mice and throwing people down the stairs; Grimms' fairy tales about wicked stepmothers and stepdaughters. They knew more about families nursing greed, anger, and hatred than all the psychologists put together.

Carol set Jenny down. "We're going to get a new house, Jenny, and a new life," she said. "And we're taking Emma with us." ●

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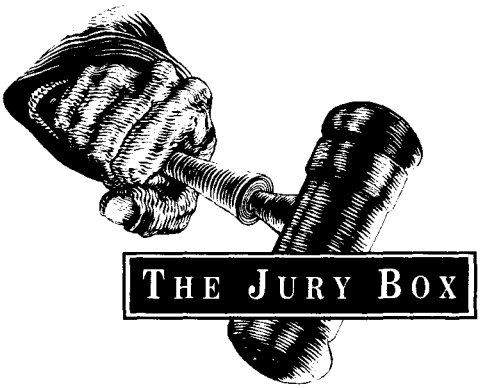

by Jon L. Breen

Around the time you read this, the Mystery Writers of America will announce their Edgar nominations for the best of 2002. In 1987, Scott Turow's *Presumed Innocent,* one of the landmark crime novels of the past twenty years, was bypassed by the Edgar committees, both for novel and first novel, despite its widely acknowledged quality and high profile on the bestseller lists. It will be interesting to see what the 2002 first-novel committee does with another number-one bestseller, assuming it was submitted to them by its publisher. Though it is neither quite so fine a novel as Turow's nor (with its fantasy element) quite as neat a fit in the mystery genre, it's hard to imagine many better first (or non-first) novels appeared during the year.

**** Alice Sebold: *The Lovely Bones,* Little, Brown, $21.95. Fourteen-year-old murder victim Susie Salmon watches from above the effects of her death on her family, her friends, her town, her murderer, and the police detective on the case. A ghost story from the ghost's point of view, with constant echoes of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and a comforting view of the afterlife reminiscent of Richard Matheson's *What Dreams May Come,* it is beautifully written, emotionally involving, and indisputably crime fiction, even in an unconventional sense an inverted detective story.

**** Rochelle Krich: *Blues in the Night,* Ballantine, $23.95. The first case for true-crime writer Molly Blume (yes, she's accustomed to the *Ulysses* jokes) is an unqualified winner. The Southern California background, the details of Orthodox Judaism, an easygoing vein of humor, and a vividly captured cast support a strong plot involving a case of infanticide and possible postpartum psychosis. The solution will probably surprise you, but the clues are so fairly provided it seems in-

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evitable in retrospect.

*** Michael Jecks: *The Devil's Acolyte,* Headline/ Trafalgar Square, $28. In 1322, Sir Baldwin Furnshill and Bailiff Simon Puttock investigate the theft of an abbot's wine, which seems to replicate a legendary Dartmoor crime of years before, and the murder of a tin miner. Complete with glossary, character list, and scholarly author's note, this is another solid entry in one of the best historical series going. (One mild complaint: Jecks too frequently resorts to contemporary slang. "Grotty"?)

*** Val Davis: *Thread of the Spider,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. In her fifth case, the object of historical archaeologist Nicolette Scott's interest is not an aircraft but a 1937 Packard, once driven by a Bonnie-and-Clyde-like team of bank robbers who operated in 1940s Utah. Shifting between past and present, the Davis team (Robert and Angie Irvine) gradually reveal a bizarre conspiracy involving a cataclysmic event in 20th-century American history. Apart from the well-calibrated suspense, this fast-moving, economical thriller further develops the prickly but loving relationship of Nick and her father, Anasazi expert Elliott.

*** John Lutz: *The Night Watcher,* Leisure, $6.99. Leave it to a consummate pro to show the serial-killer novel can still be vital and original. As the police detective team of Ben Stack and Rica Lopez search for The Torcher, whose victims burn to death in Manhattan highrises, Lutz's mastery of time-shifting structure and deft characterization makes a large cast and complex plot easy to keep straight.

*** Ed McBain: *Fat Ollie's Book,* Simon&Schuster, $25. The 88th Precinct's obese bigot and aspiring novelist Ollie Weeks tries to recover his manuscript, stolen by a transvestite male prostitute who mistakes it for nonfiction, while investigating with the 87th's Carella and Kling the murder of a politician. Fat Ollie's observations on writing are classic satire, and the text of his story, told from the unconvincing perspective of a policewoman and including an absurd finishing surprise, is hilarious.

*** Stuart Palmer: *Hildegarde Withers: Uncollected Riddles,* Crippen & Landru, $29 hardcover, $19 trade paper. Eleven cases for the great spinster schoolteacher sleuth and her police detective friend Oscar Piper, all save a 1948 story from *EQMM* first published between 1933 and 1935 in *Mystery,* are fully populated classical whodunits, smoothly written and ornately plotted, most set in vivid and nostalgic Manhattan locales: a flea circus, a Fifth Avenue St. Patrick's Day parade, a Madison Square Garden dog show, a Carnegie Hall dance studio, a burlesque theatre. The author's widow, Jennifer Venola, contributes a brief introduction.

*** Michael Collins: *Spies and Thieves, Cops and Killers, Etc.,*

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Five Star, $25.95. Seventeen stories, solidly professional and as varied in viewpoint and subject matter as the title suggests, first appeared between 1962 and 1973 (including one from *EQMM* and four from *AHMM*), except for a single 1999 entry. The copyright page won't tell you that most were published under the prolific author's other bylines: John Crowe, William Arden, John Douglas, Mark Sadler, and (most frequently) Dennis Lynds. The oldest story, the remarkably timely "Freedom Fighter," and the newest, "A Part of History," are most interesting for their ironic reflections on war.

*** Michael Collins: *The Temple of the Golden Horde,* Wildside, $29.95. Under the house name Robert Hart Davis, Collins wrote the lead novella in the third issue (May 1974) of the short-lived *Charlie Chan Mystery Magazine.* His updated version of the Honolulu detective captures Earl Derr Biggers' character better than the magazine's earlier attempts, and the tricky puzzle of a San Francisco religious cult and its sacred scrolls is appropriately in the spirit of a 1930s movie whodunit.

** Bill Pronzini and Jeffrey M. Wallman: *The Pawns of Death,* Wildside, $29.95. Set against the background of a Parisian chess tournament and including an unusual murder weapon and a trap for the killer, the novella from the fourth and last issue of *CCMM* (August 1974) is also highly enjoyable. The fun quotient would be even greater with authentic Chan dialogue, but according to Pronzini's introduction, the editors' dubious updating efforts led them to excise most of the aphorisms.

** Elizabeth George: *I, Richard,* Bantam, $25.95. Of these five longish short stories, only the first, "Exposure," concerns Scotland Yard sleuth Thomas Lynley. Extensively revised from an earlier version in *Sisters in Crime 2* (1990), it has a clever idea at its core, but the criminal's motivation is murky. The second, "The Surprise of His Life," is the weakest, trotting out a twist ending of devastating triteness. The others have some interesting concepts undercut by the ponderous style. Each story is preceded by a substantial introduction.

** Claire M. Johnson: *Beat Until Stiff,* Poisoned Pen, $24.95. My culinary consultant enjoyed the richly detailed background of the restaurant business, and I was attracted by one of the cleverest double-meaning titles in memory. Early on there's too much clumsy exposition in dialogue, and pastry chef Mary Ryan, recently divorced from a San Francisco homicide detective, is an exceptionally miserable sourpuss protagonist even by standards of the current market. But it's a sound and readable job that whets the appetite for future cases of (I hope) a happier Mary. (Biggest surprise: no recipes are included!)

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Art by Mark Evans

THE SPACES BETWEEN

by Mary Freeman

She wasn't sure why she didn't like this job. Jenna Van Deane crossed the flagstone patio that connected the guesthouse to the sprawl of expensive glass and decking that made up the main house. It was easily the cushiest housesitting job she'd had in the last five years. The blue water of the free-form pool glittered in the morning light, wisps of steam rising in the crisp spring air. No pets to care for, no maintenance chores, plus a generous expense account. What could be better? In the distance, beyond trees that hid Highway 101 from view, the ocean gleamed blue beneath the clear morning sky. Jenna dropped the thick towel and the faded silk kimono she used as a bathrobe onto one of the teakwood deck chairs and dove into the deep end of the pool. The water closed around her, blood-warm after the chill of her walk, and she swam the length of the pool underwater, somersaulting off the shallow end and surfacing to settle into a long, slow crawl stroke. She swam steadily until she'd covered an approximate mile, wishing she could be swimming in the ocean. Not here. Not in the frigid water that lay off the Oregon coast.

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Climbing out, she started to dry off, then paused as the sound of tires reached her. Absently wringing water from her long black hair, she watched the bend where the driveway emerged from the artful thicket of huge rhododendrons. Only the gardener had the code for the gate, according to Condon Faris, her boss. And the gardener didn't come in until noon.

The county sheriff's logo on the side of the white Jeep Cherokee raised her eyebrows. Jenna reached for her kimono, belted it around her, and went down the wide stone steps that led from the patio to the parking area, a sense of foreboding tickling the back of her neck.

When the pseudonymous Mary Freeman debuted in the mystery field with the gardening mystery *Devil's Trumpet* she was already the author of three successful science fiction novels (*The Drylands, Chimera,* and *The Stone Garden*) under her real name, Mary Rosenblum. The amateur sleuth of her mystery novels, Rachel O'Connor, has now starred in four books, the most recent, *Garden View,* published by Putnam (May '02). The author lives in Oregon. ¶

"Mornin'." A tall, lanky deputy wearing mirror shades climbed from the front seat. "Deputy Kaen," he said tersely. "You are?"

"I am. How'd you get through the gate?" Jenna watched his head tilt back as he realized she was taller than he by a full inch. She seemed to have inherited the proportions of a short person along with her mother's Indonesian skin and hair. Her six-foot-two frame startled people.

The deputy seemed to have recovered from his surprise. "Let's start with who you are." His voice was as expressionless as his mirror-shaded stare.

"Mr. Faris hired me to stay here while he's in Europe." She shrugged. "Can I help you?"

"You got some ID to prove that?"

"You got a reason to see it?" She didn't move. "This is private property."

He hesitated, then—a little to her surprise—he shrugged. "Look, I'm not here to pick a fight. We got an anonymous call that there'd been a break-in. The sheriff figured we'd better check it out."

"Faris told me about the alarm system." Jenna shoved her wet hair back from her face, beginning to feel the morning chill in spite of the weak March sun. "If he wasn't lying, then anyone who got in and out without waking up the county is really good. I'm afraid to so much as touch a window." That was one of the things that had bothered her about the job. The rich folk she sat for were usually paranoid about break-ins, but there had been an odd edge

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to Faris's paranoia. "If you want to risk setting the system off, feel free."

"Let's go take a look." He took off the damn shades finally.

He had gray eyes and a long face that wasn't handsome, but wasn't too bad. Jenna followed him across the stone patio, up the steps to the small garden terrace next to the huge window wall of the living room, past the tiny pool that spilled a chuckling trickle of water through immaculately groomed bonsai and rock plants, past the small sand garden with the artful patterns combed into it daily by Carey, the gardener, and up to the windowed wall. The whole wall could rise in sections like giant garage doors, opening the living room to the terrace and the pool beyond it. High-tech and fancy.

Jenna peered over the deputy's shoulder. The white carpet swept like new snow across the floor to wash around the huge stone fireplace with the built-in wrought-iron grill racks on one side and the brick pizza oven on the other. Faris had bragged that the place had been featured in half a dozen upscale lifestyle magazines. She didn't doubt it. "No sign of anything wrong," she said.

The deputy didn't answer her. He walked on around the huge house, past the cedar-framed raised beds of the salad and herb garden with its rows of red and green lettuces and staked peppers and tomatoes beneath greenhouse panels. The vegetables were as polished and perfect as the rest of the landscape. A straw bee skep added to the rustic atmosphere. A brick patio with grill and gas stove was set with more teak furniture. At the far end of the house, rhodies and azaleas closed in around the house again and the master-bedroom wing jutted out over a twenty-foot cliff. Glass roofed the polished deck and tasteful white painted iron chairs, bright with green-striped cushions, clustered cozily around a round glass-topped table.

The French doors that opened onto the private deck stood ajar. The hair prickled the back of Jenna's neck and she heard the deputy suck in a quick breath. "When were you last out here?" he asked.

"Yesterday." A bee from the skep tangled itself in her still-damp hair and she freed it absently. "I walk the property morning and evening, checking for any signs that anyone was here." She always did that, whether the owner asked for it or not. Faris had asked. "It was just before dark. The doors were shut."

Kaen scrambled over the railing and onto the deck. He crossed the cedar planks swiftly, nudged the door open with his toe, and gave a soft grunt, as if someone had poked him hard in the stomach. Jenna levered herself over the railing in one lithe bound and came up behind him. She had never seen the bedroom. Gold brocaded silk shrouded all the windows. Someone had pulled the cur-

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tains back from the French doors. The huge round bed filled the center of the twilight room on a raised dais. The mirrored ceiling reflected spotlights and candles, the trapeze above the bed, chains on the walls, and straps. Only then did she notice the rusty stain that marred the hem of white satin sheets. The stain darkened the white carpet beneath the sheets, too. It originated from beneath the body sprawled facedown on the white carpet. Then she became aware of the smell. Jenna swallowed quickly and backed away, gulping in a lungful of clean air.

"I'd better put in a call to the sheriff." Deputy Kaen backed out of the room. "I guess Faris didn't go on his trip after all." He looked at her sharply as he pulled his cell phone from his pocket. "When did you see him last?"

"The day he left. Two weeks ago." Jenna breathed deeply. "I met him in Portland, at the airport, and got the keys to the guesthouse and the gate code from him. He left me a list of instructions in the guesthouse."

"You never came out here for an interview?" Kaen raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Seems like he was being pretty trusting."

"I thought he was in a hurry." She returned his stare, not liking his tone at all. "He got my name from one of my regulars. It's a pretty good reference." She swung herself over the railing without waiting for his reply and walked around the huge house to the front terrace. So much money here. She glanced out over the sparkling pool with its steaming jacuzzi screened by perfectly trimmed shrubs. The sound of tires reached her. The sheriff was arriving, followed by a van. Forensics people? An ambulance brought up the rear of the parade.

She sat on one of the upholstered chairs, her hair drying in the warming breeze, a scatter of goosebumps tightening her skin. People came and went, wearing gloves, carrying cameras and equipment. Finally, the ambulance crew wheeled the body bag out to the ambulance, slid it in, and slammed the doors. It was close to noon, according to the overhead sun. It occurred to her that she hadn't eaten breakfast, but she didn't feel hungry. Carey the gardener arrived for his afternoon of grooming shrubs and lawn. The sheriff himself intercepted him as he drove his pickup toward the multiple garage below the house. Jenna watched him lean in at the window and speak, then turn back to climb the terrace steps again. Carey turned off the engine and climbed out of his spotless truck, leaning on the door, his tilted gray eyes on the house, his oval face wearing a thoughtful expression.

A shadow fell across her and she looked up to find the deputy looking down at her. He had a notebook in his hand. "So you got hired to housesit, you met your boss at the airport, he handed you the keys, and that was it?" He sat down in a chaise longue beside

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her. "Seems kind of casual, considering the value of all this." He waved vaguely at the house and grounds. "That didn't bother you?"

"Yes, it bothered me." She shrugged. "But I've done this for five years now, full time. Rich people—really rich people—aren't like us. They're different."

He grunted and glanced at the house. "What did you do before you became a housesitter?"

"I . . . worked for a photographer." The words came slowly even now. She wondered if they'd ever stop hurting.

"What was the name?" Kaen had his notebook out now.

"Bocek." She marveled at how normal she sounded. "Daren Bocek. Is it important?"

"You never know what's important." Kaen gave her a sideways look. "He's kind of famous, isn't he? He does black-and-white and you never miss the color." He frowned. "Didn't he get killed a few years back?"

"Five years ago." She fixed her eyes on that distant horizon of ocean vastness. "In what used to be Yugoslavia. A farmer thought he was . . . something."

"Do you always keep a .38 in your bedside drawer?"

"Or I wear it. I have a carry permit." She faced him at last, wanting nothing so much as to go walk for a couple of hours on the beach. Maybe even swim, to hell with the cold. "Do you understand that I housesit for very wealthy people? They are prime targets for thieves and there is a lot of money at stake. It's part of my job."

"We'll have to take it in." He was silent for a moment, his gray eyes enigmatic. "Have you ever had to use it?" he asked finally, his voice quiet.

Once. She sighed. "Are you done with your search? Can I get dressed now?"

"I guess so. You aren't planning on leaving, are you?"

Jenna laughed as she rose to her feet. "Where would I go?" She circled the pool, noticing that Carey was talking earnestly to the sheriff. As she turned to close the guesthouse door, she looked back at the pool. The detective still stood there, watching her, his expression invisible in the sun glare. She closed the door. Locked it.

She stuck a bowl of canned vegetable soup into the microwave to heat—more because she felt she should eat than because she was hungry. The deputy had left few signs of his search, and for that she was grateful. Still, the rooms felt claustrophobic, thick with the sense that someone had pawed through her private space. The last book she and Daren had worked on together, *Faces,* had been

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replaced crookedly on the bookshelf. She straightened it, wondering if the deputy had opened it and looked through it. She tried to stem the tide of memory, the hours spent sorting through the photos, looking at the men and women and children, victims of war and of the refugee camps, weaving together a history from the lines and shadows of their faces and the expression in their eyes.

She ended up cleaning, dusting, wiping down the surfaces that Kaen might have touched. When she remembered her soup, it was cold, slightly gelatinous, the perfect cubes of carrot and potato unappetizing and artificial-looking. Jenna grabbed a sweatshirt, because the waning day had clouded over, and crossed the manicured lawn to the rhododendrons that hedged the vast yard. Carey had done his usual meticulous job of trimming, weeding, and mowing, as if the boss might still come out and criticize. She ducked through the waxy leaves of the rhodies and let herself through the small, rusty gate she'd found, heading downhill, toward the paved county road. She kept seeing that bedroom, with the chains hanging on the wall and the straps. It didn't fit with the round, unformed, almost childish face of the man who had handed her the keys and gate code at the airport.

Or maybe it did fit.

She shivered in the twilight that filled the spaces between the trunks of the second-growth firs, glad to see the red and green beer-sign neon that marked the little roadside store. It offered ice from the weathered bin out front, soft drinks and beer, bait, snacks, and a moderate selection of basic groceries. Mel, the owner, a round-shouldered man in his fifties with sagging jowls and thinning hair, looked up from the magazine he was reading behind the counter and smiled. "How's things up at the big house?" He laid the magazine aside. "My sister down in Coos Bay sent me a box of her smoked salmon. I thought you might want some. It's real good."

"Thanks." She got a pint of grapefruit juice from the cooler, warmed by his generosity. She liked Mel. He had grown up in this town, had gotten out of the dying fishing industry in time, he said. "I'd love some of that salmon. Tell your sister thanks for me."

"She sends me enough for ten people." He laid a package wrapped in butcher paper on the counter, took her dollar, and rang up the juice. "Must have been a bad accident up the road a ways." He handed her her change, his eyes bright with curiosity. "Saw the sheriff go by and an ambulance. Early today."

Jenna hesitated. "Somebody murdered Mr. Faris," she said at last.

"I thought he was in Europe," Mel said blankly.

"Me, too." Jenna twisted the bottle of juice open and took a long swallow, trying to wash away the memory of that smell.

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"I'm not sorry." Mel was staring at the beer and pop cooler at the far end of the store. "I know he gave money to the local charities and all . . . but he was not a nice man. No." He was speaking softly, as if to himself. "I am not sorry that someone killed him. He ruined my daughter's life. One day last fall, I was out deer hunting. I came down to the top of this meadow and . . . there he was." His words were soft, breathy. "I raised the rifle and I looked at him through the scope. Aimed right between his shoulder blades. Just stood there with my finger on the trigger. Guess I don't have what it takes." He looked at her, his eyes dark and enigmatic in the dim light of the flickering fluorescents. "Have you ever lost someone that you really, really loved?"

"Yes," Jenna whispered. She had heard the local stories about how his daughter had drowned and it probably wasn't an accident.

"Your life ends. You find yourself in a space between that old life and maybe a new one. But . . . sometimes that new life never starts."

"No. Sometimes it doesn't." Not really. Jenna reached out, put her hand on his arm. He started, raised his head. Gave her a weak smile.

"So what are you going to do?" he asked, obviously changing the subject. "You'll have to leave, won't you?"

She nodded. "Eventually. I'm sure it will take people awhile to untangle the legalities."

"I'll miss you." Mel slid the wrapped salmon across the counter. "I've enjoyed our talks."

"Me, too." Jenna said goodnight and made her way out into the deepening dusk. The darkness beneath the firs was absolute now, and the moon wasn't up yet. She started at the rustle of some bird or small animal off to her right, chided herself for her jumpiness, but found herself listening—hard—all the way back.

When she emerged from the rhodies, she found light flooding the pool area. A lone figure sat on one of the fancy chairs. She hesitated for a moment, then crossed the lawn to the poolside as she recognized Deputy Kaen.

"I was getting worried." He stood, his fair hair glinting in the glow from the big halogen lamps. "Do you always go walking by yourself at night?"

"It wasn't night when I left. I went down to the store."

"Mel's place." Kaen nodded. "You might want to remember that we have a killer on the loose here."

"You're the one who took my .38," she said mildly.

"The sheriff isn't very happy with you." Kaen sat down again, his eyes on her face. "He really wanted to take you in. Just in case. I talked him out of it."

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"Thanks." She eyed him warily, thinking that this felt like a good cop-bad cop game. "So did you need something?"

"Did you come directly here from the airport, after you got the keys from Faris?"

Jenna frowned. "No, I didn't. I already had a room at a motel and my car was at a garage. It needed to have the brakes adjusted. I told him I couldn't start until the next day and he said that was fine." The deputy was nodding. "How come?" she asked.

"He was killed here," Kaen said slowly. "He must have left the airport right after you talked to him and driven out here. At least that's the timing the coroner gave us."

Jenna frowned, thinking over that brief conversation in the plush retreat of the airline's private club for frequent fliers. Shook her head. "He didn't say anything strange," she said. "Just some how-to info, a list of numbers to call, gate code." She shrugged. "Keys. He sure seemed like a man about to get on a plane." She looked at him, the thing that had nagged her about that bedroom finally surfacing. "Pictures," she said. "That's what the lighting is all about. He was making videos or DVDs in his little playground. Or maybe just putting the stuff straight out on the Net."

Kaen was staring at her blankly.

"I know a little bit about lighting," she said impatiently. "And the son of these people I sat for—he was making some pretty hot porn movies in his bedroom while his parents were away on skiing weekends. I saw his setup while I was staying there. I bet Faris has hidden video lenses in the walls for nice action shots."

Kaen unfolded his lanky frame from the chair. "Let's go look."

He had a key to the house, let them in through the big entry doors. An open stairway spiraled upward in the vaulted entryway and she could see the snowbank carpet of the living room to the left. As soon as they entered, a glass and steel chandelier burst into light. "Magic," Kaen said, and gave her a crooked grin.

"Tech," said Jenna. She followed him through a room that had bookshelves and a wall-sized TV screen, past a dining room with a manor-sized table, down a wide hall, and then through more French doors into the bedroom. All the way, soft, subtle light came on as they entered a room. Not here. Jenna stood on the threshold of the wide door, breathing shallowly because you could still smell that sweet thick odor of rotting flesh. Kaen fumbled, cursed under his breath, then lights came on, yellow indirect light from wall sconces.

Yeah, the video eyes were there. She circled the room, pointing them out. Five of them, so that he could cover all kinds of angles. "He'll have some kind of studio where all this goes," she said.

"We sure didn't find it." Kaen gave her a thoughtful look. "You're the expert on the rich and kinky. Where would you look?"

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"Close and easy to get to." She shrugged. "He might want to duck in during . . . sessions. To make changes."

Two rooms opened off the master bedroom. To the left of the deck, a walk-in closet held racks of clothes, a small upholstered bench, a full-length mirror, and floor-to-ceiling shelves of boots, shoes, and sandals. The dude sure liked shoes, Jenna thought, picking up a pair of Gucci boots. The walls were paneled in some pale wood with a buttery finish. Easy to hide a door here. She left Kaen to work on it and checked out the master bath. It curved out over the drop-off, walled waist-high in glass brick, with wide glass windows above, so that you felt you were perched above the wooded slope and the distant ocean. A glass brick-walled shower was big enough for a small party, with multiple shower heads at different heights. A spa tub could hold that party after they finished their shower, Jenna thought. A tile deck surrounded it, decorated with ferns and tasteful groupings of candles. Thick towels were piled with studied casualness in the corners. The Martha Stewart decor didn't fit with what had gone on here.

"Got it." Kaen's triumphant voice interrupted her reverie.

The narrow door was hidden perfectly by the wooden paneling when it was closed. It opened at the end of one of the clothes racks. Three video monitors, computer equipment, and a soundboard filled the small white room. A color printer stood on the white Formica desk and pictures printed on glossy photo stock covered the walls. Some had the look of straight photographs, others were large and complex pieces combining faces, bodies, and color. "Adobe Photoshop," Jenna murmured.

Sex and violence. That was the theme. Men and women, women and women. No men and men, she thought absently. She wondered if the blood in some of them was real. The sick feeling in her stomach made her think it was.

"Holy shit," Kaen said softly.

"Amen." She went out, walked through the bedroom and out onto the small deck, breathing in deep lungfuls of the night air. You could smell the sea, even this far away. She wondered what those girls had expected. That?

"You okay?" Kaen came up behind her.

She looked down, realized that her hands were shaking. "Not really." She straightened. "You know, I saw a lot worse. When we did *Faces.* I don't know why this is different. But it is."

He made a movement as if to touch her, didn't. "I put a call in to the sheriff," he said. "You want me to walk back to the guesthouse with you?"

"That's okay," she said, and swung herself over the railing. No way was she walking back through that bedroom with its white satin sheets and its ghosts.

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He followed her over the railing and walked back with her, not saying anything. At the guesthouse, he hesitated at the door. "If you need anything," he said at last, "I'll be outside."

Jenna locked the door and turned on the shaded lamp over the plush easy chair. She pulled *Faces* from the shelf and sat with it in her lap, listening to the arrival of the sheriff and whomever he had brought with him. *What we do to each other.* The thought circled in her head like a trapped crow.

She lay on the sofa, listening until the last car left, then listening to night noises and the faint distant sigh of the ocean until the first hint of dawn began to gray the sky. Then she got up and let herself through the hidden gate in the rhodies, jogging the two miles downhill to the crescent beach below the highway. She ran into the surf, crashing into the frigid breakers, gasping, flinging herself against the stinging, freezing surge of the waves until she was exhausted and shivering.

She was staring into the refrigerator, listening to the drone of the evening news on TV, when a knock on the door startled her. Cops, she told herself, but wished like hell that the sheriff had let her keep her .38. "Who's there?" She stood still, washed in the cold breath of the open fridge, listening.

"It's me. Deputy Kaen."

Oh. She crossed the kitchen, pulled the door open. "I thought you guys finished up this morning."

"We did." He looked exhausted, his face gaunt.

"Rough day?" She held the door open.

"Yeah. Actually." He walked into the guesthouse, looked around as if he had never been here before. "We arrested Mel Davies this afternoon." He sat down at the round oak table, laid a brown manilla envelope on it with the care that you'd use handling high explosives. "For killing Faris."

"Mel? As in Mel the guy who owns the grocery down the hill?"

"Yeah." He leaned his elbows on the table, a curve in his spine. "He taught me to fish. I used to work on his boat, summers and weekends. He fixed my curve ball when I was in Little League."

Jenna walked over to the kitchen window, peering out at the floodlit pool, seeing Mel's face as he told her, *I guess I didn't have what it takes.* "He didn't kill Faris," she said.

"We found his daughter's . . . photo. Jeez, I've known her since . . ." He flung the manilla envelope away from him as if it were coated with acid, leaned his head in his hands. "Sometimes I hate this job. He admitted it. That he killed Faris. Said the slime posted Kelly's pictures on the Net. Where everyone could see. She left a

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suicide note, he said. He burned it. Just waited for the right time. He threw the gun off the pier."

Jenna walked over to the fridge, opened it. Got out eggs, butter, a chunk of Havarti cheese. "He would have liked to, maybe. He didn't." She set a skillet on the burner, turned it on high. "Maybe he figures he'll give the real killer a free ride. Like a thank-you." She beat the eggs lightly, added a pinch of chervil, pepper, salt, poured them onto the sizzling, browning butter. "You know he didn't do it."

"Gonna be damn hard to figure out who did, since he confessed."

"Ah, come on." She grated the creamy Havarti, frowning at the pale curls of cheese falling to the cutting board. "Once you start asking him real questions, like what was the caliber of the gun that killed Faris, you know you're gonna start turning up inconsistencies."

"If the sheriff asks." Kaen turned his head slowly, as if his neck vertebrae were rusty. "It's a big feather for him, solving this so quick when it's all over national TV. He's got an election coming up this fall. Mel doesn't want a trial." His voice creaked. "I think he wants the death penalty."

Living in the spaces between, he'd said. Maybe he did. She divided the eggs, slid them onto two plates, carried them to the table with a couple of forks.

"What's that?" Kaen looked up.

"An omelet." She plunked one plate down in front of him, sat down with her own plate across from him.

"I'm not . . ." He picked up the fork, cut a chunk of browned egg and oozing cheese. "Thanks." He ate ravenously and her own stomach agreed. She got up, poured two glasses of Zinfandel from the bottle she'd opened earlier. He didn't protest when she set one in front of him. When he pushed his plate away, he looked a little better. "Thanks a lot. I was hungry." He picked up the wineglass, swirled it so that the wine rose redly to the lip of the glass. "Just so you know," he said slowly, "nobody knows besides the sheriff, you, and me, that we found the pictures." He got to his feet, his gray eyes steady on her face. "Thanks," he said. "Lock your doors, okay?"

"Always."

He carried the dishes to the sink, rinsed them, and put them into the dishwasher. At the door, he hesitated, as if he wanted to say something more. Instead he gave a jerky shrug and left, closing the door gently behind him. She locked it and stood leaning against the panels, listening to the sound of his car as he drove up the long driveway to the locked gate. Only then did she retrieve the manilla envelope from where he had forgotten it on the floor.

The pictures were ugly. The petite blond girl was pretty enough.

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The things she was doing with a couple of men and then a woman were ugly. Mel's daughter? Kaen had known her since she was a kid. Had he been in love with her? Jenna wondered. Why was he torturing himself with these? She sighed and started to put the ugly pictures away. Stopped.

There was something about the woman with her in one of the shots. She studied it, thinking she'd seen that face before, letting her vision blur, trying to place her. It was almost there, almost at the surface. . . . She shook her head, slid the photos back into the envelope, and dropped it onto the table. It would come to her eventually.

She read for a while—a new novel from an author who had recently won the Pulitzer. But the convoluted story of Africa and struggle and race didn't hold her, and she found herself pacing the small cottage, making tea she didn't really want, wiping down the counter that didn't need wiping. Weather was moving in. Wind whined around the cottage and she could imagine that she heard the sound of the storm-driven breakers. The air seemed full of ghosts, whispering and crying in the wind. Ghosts, she didn't need, thank you. She put on her jacket and went out, her hair whipped by the salty wind, strangely soothed by the elements' fury.

She skirted the lighted pool area, keeping to the shadows at the edge of the landscaped shrubs beyond the little kitchen garden, finding herself circling back to the rear of the house where the white satin and bloodstained bedroom gazed out at the ocean. She kept seeing images from those photographs overlaid on the rainy darkness, the golden girl who had gone swimming for one last time in the winter ocean and the girl with the oval face and the tilted gray eyes.

Jenna halted below the railing, skin ridging to goosebumps that had nothing to do with the chill in the air. In her mind's eye, two separate faces merged, one overlaid on the other. Of course! She sucked in a shallow breath. He had the code to the gate, could have come up with a reason to bring Faris hurrying back to the house. She turned back toward the guesthouse, meaning to call Kaen, tell him who did it.

"Not a nice night for a stroll." The figure emerged from the shadows and Jenna gasped in spite of herself. "Most people would stay inside," Carey, the gardener, said mildly. Light from the pool floods seeped around the corner of the house, faintly illuminating the lithe figure clad in black sweatshirt and jeans. It edged him with light, revealing the oval shape of his face.

She didn't need light to visualize the tilt of the gray eyes, the fine, almost effeminate oval of his face, with the curved sensual lips. "So, who was she?" Her voice sounded harsh as the croak of a

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frog. "Your sister?"

"My twin. You found the pictures." His tone was matter-of-fact. "I knew they were there. She told me what he was up to. He offered her a lot of money. She was a star in that kind of thing. She always wanted to be a star, and she tried so damn hard down in Hollywood. I guess eventually it didn't matter how she did it," he said softly. "She told me she was getting old, running out of time. She was twenty-six. So she didn't mind putting on a command performance for him. I never heard from her again. I hired a detective and he tracked her to this place. After that . . ." His shoulders lifted in a shrug. "The detective contacted Faris about her. He said that he'd slept with her, that she'd gotten bored and left. She wouldn't do that—not let me know where she was. He killed her. And the pictures are here. Nobody knows about . . . what she did. Our mother doesn't know. She used a fake name. Now, nobody will ever know." He smiled and the curve of his lips chilled Jenna. "Faris hired me right off," Carey said. "He never guessed."

Deep inside the house, an orange flicker wakened, gleaming through the curtained windows. A second later an explosion inside shattered the window next to Jenna. She stumbled sideways, stung by shards of flying glass, tasting blood on her lips. An arm clamped across her throat, cutting off her air. Jenna struggled to breathe, chest burning, clawing at his face, reaching for his eyes. He grabbed one wrist, twisted it savagely. She heard a bone snap with the dry sound of a stick breaking, bit back a scream, losing her footing as he dragged her backward. She tried to kick him but he kept twisting her wrist and blackness swam across her vision, streaked with jagged bolts of red. He grunted and staggered, and for a moment lost his balance. Something hard hit the side of her thigh. The raised bed. She made the identification thickly, her head filled with black fog. His grip on her loosened for a moment.

She twisted in his briefly slackened grip, reaching up, back with her good hand, felt skin, the soft moisture of an eye, raked her nails into it with all the strength she had left. He yelled and let go. She fell to her knees, scrambled away from him, injured arm hugged against her, hearing his grunt and scramble of pursuit. Outstretched fingers brushed . . . straw. The skep. Behind, orange light and heat washed across the patio and the hive hummed with alarm. She grabbed the straw hive, saying a prayer that it was all one piece and not merely a decorative cover.

It was all one piece, not yet heavy with honey this early in the year. Carey was charging her, his face a mask of hatred, his eyes gleaming with an icy light. She clutched the skep awkwardly, swung it, and hit him full in the face, the straw coils bursting, bees exploding from the ruined comb that cracked and crumbled

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down his chest and shoulders. Fire glow gleamed on honey and pale shattered wax.

He screamed, clawing at his face, bees all over him, still confused by dark and light, but stinging, stinging. Angry workers swarmed around Jenna and the first stings burned on her arms and face. She covered her eyes with her arm, scrambled to her feet, and ran, lurching clumsily between the beds, heading for the light, the pool, and the phone in the guesthouse. Behind her, the gardener bellowed with rage and pain, pounding after her now in uneven rushes, pausing to scrub at the bees that attacked him. Her only hope was the rhodies. Play deadly hide and seek until someone showed up to fight the fire.

Not a good prospect. She veered right, slowed by the slope, gasping in lungfuls of air that burned. A few feet from the sheltering rhodies, a giant hand slapped her flat and a gunshot echoed in her ears, then another. Jenna clawed her way forward through the litter of old leaves and twigs, burrowing into the darkness, praying that he'd lose her in the dark. Reality fuzzed in and out as she struggled forward, making less and less progress. Light from the burning house washed across the rhododendrons and her shadow streaked the ground, stark and black. Blood gleamed in a wet deadly track behind her, pointing the way. Jenna tried to claw her way deeper, but it was too late. He'd see her easily now, follow the blood. She wasn't making much progress. All the strength was leaking out of her body and pain soaked in to replace it, a burning ache that spread through her side and into her chest, squeezing the air out of her lungs so that she panted for breath.

He had found her. She heard the soft hiss of footsteps on the mowed lawn, saw the pool of a flash beam sliding in slow zigzags beneath the rhodie branches, sliding toward her, groped frantically for something, anything. Her left arm wouldn't work at all anymore. Her fingers closed around a piece of broken branch and she willed them to close hard, drawing herself to her knees, holding back the pain. As he shoved his way through the branches, she swung at him.

"Jenna?" Detective Kaen caught the stick in mid-swing, his flash beam blinding her as he dropped to his knees. "Holy . . . Hey, Clem," he shouted over his shoulder. "Get an ambulance out here, fast!"

She let go at that point, and the darkness took her.

She woke to whiteness, thought for one dreamy moment that she and Daren were in bed in the Lucerne hostel they'd found, waking to the light of morning reflecting from snow. But the white evolved rapidly from snow and memory into the white of hospital sheets and pale curtains drawn around her bed. A nurse bent over her, freckled and smiling with professional reassurance as she pumped a blood-pressure cuff tight around Jenna's upper arm.

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"About time you woke up." She lifted Jenna's right wrist and took her blood pressure with practiced ease. "The doctor was getting a little worried. Not to mention your friend here." She nodded, unwrapped the cuff, and slid the curtain back with a jingle of metal rings along the bar.

Detective Kaen sat at the foot of her bed, relief in his gray eyes. "How are you doing?" He stood, his posture awkward, leaned on the rail at the foot of her bed.

"I don't know yet." She looked at the thick bandages swathing her right shoulder and arm, uncomfortably aware of a catheter beneath the sheets. Wriggled her fingers, feeling the rigid bulk of a cast. "Not as well as I could be, I gather."

"The bullet nicked your lung." Kaen's expression went grim and for a moment his eyes looked past her. "You lost a lot of blood."

"What about . . . Carey?"

"He's dead." Kaen pulled his chair around to sit near the head of the bed. "I winged him. He jumped from the cliff behind the house."

She looked away, filled with an indescribable sorrow. "An eye for an eye," she said softly, and realized that Kaen looked puzzled. "His sister was one of Faris's victims. He's sure she's dead. He got the job as gardener to kill Faris." She should tell him more, everything Carey had told her, but a wave of grief was sweeping over her, grief for Mel and his daughter, for Carey, and all the women in the pictures.

"Mel's out of jail." Kaen was standing now and reached for her hand, the one with the IV tubing but no bandages. "Where are you going to go when you get out of here?" he asked.

She shook her head. Good question. Her next job was months away.

"I nearly got you killed." He looked away. "I thought . . . the killer might come back. For the pictures. But I guess Carey was already in the house. I was up near the gate. I almost . . . didn't get there in time." Kaen cleared his throat. "My sister and her husband live here in town. They added an apartment for our mother, before she died. She said to tell you that you're welcome to stay there. Until your next job. They're nice folk."

She started to say no, then hesitated. What had Mel said, the night she'd walked down for juice after she and Kaen had found Faris's body? Something about living in the spaces between lives, how you sometimes didn't make it out. Jenna let her breath out in a sigh, looked up at the gray-eyed detective with the long, lean, not-all-that-handsome face that was so very unlike Daren's. "I don't even know your first name," she said.

"Aaron." His eyes had the look of still, shadowed pools.

"Tell your sister thanks for me," Jenna said, and smiled. He returned it and his fingers closed tightly and briefly around hers. ●

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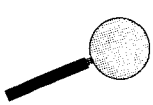

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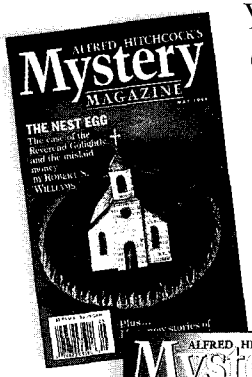

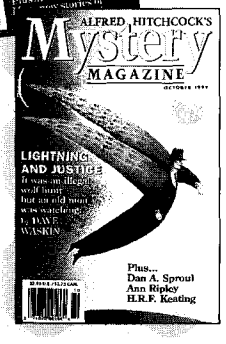

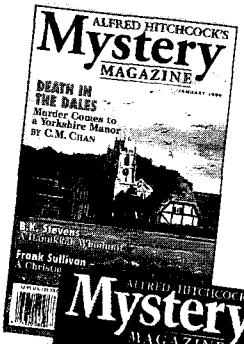

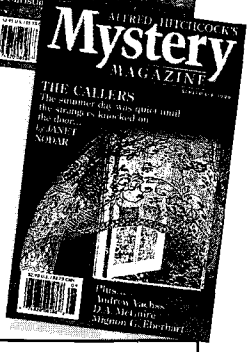

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